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THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

JULY

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THOR MEETS CAPTAIN AMERICA
by David Brin

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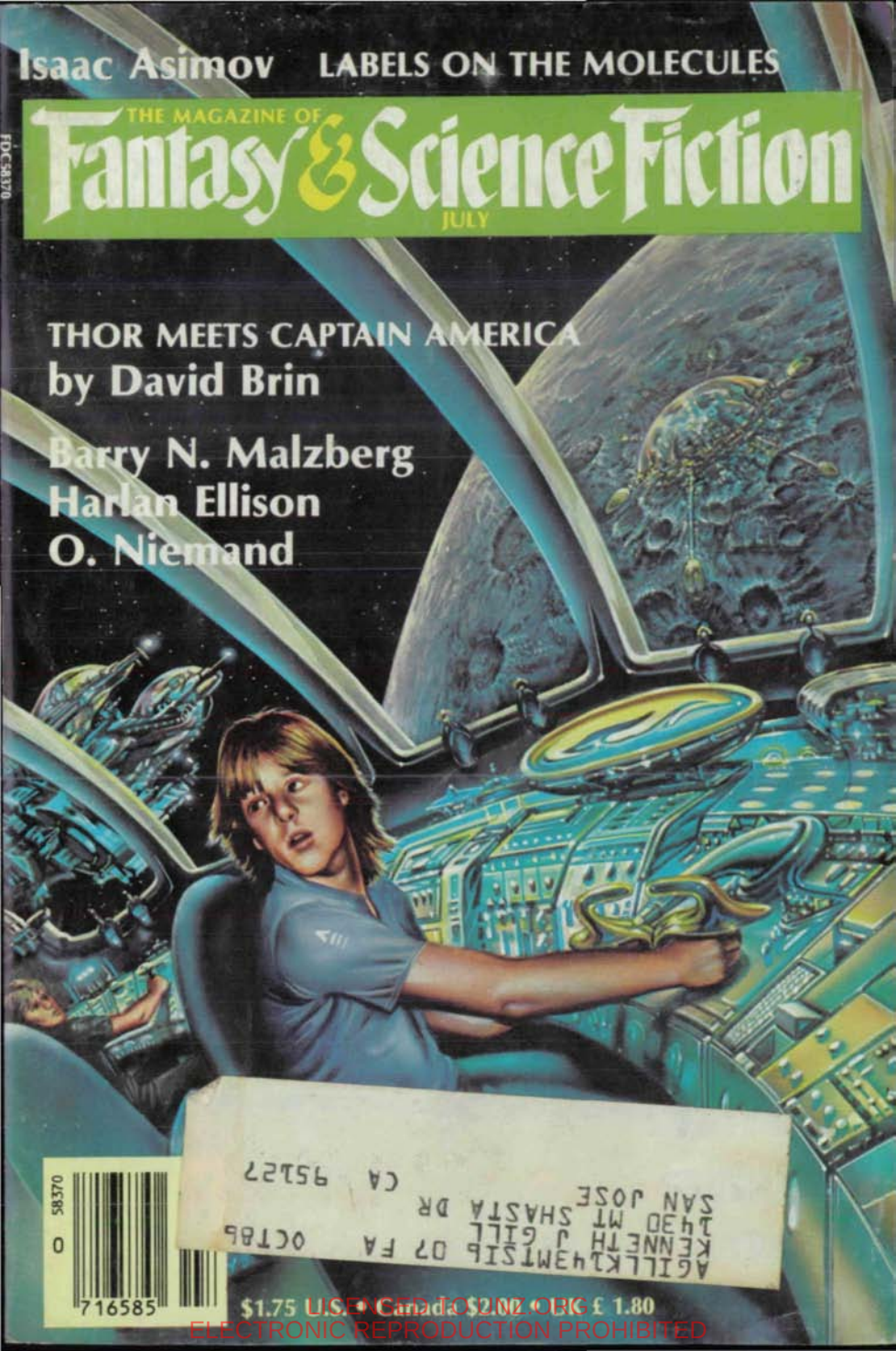

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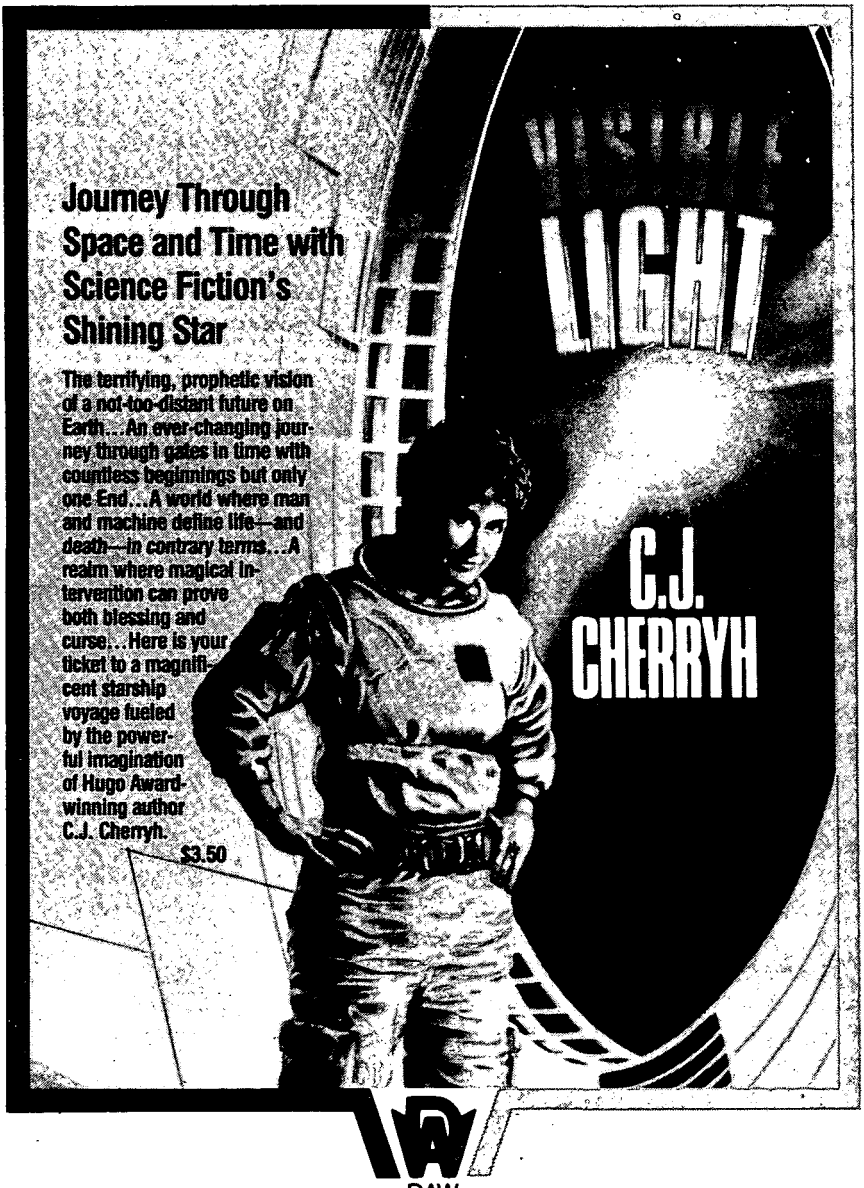
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Thor Meets Captain America

BY

DAVID BRIN

1.

Loki's dwarf rolled its eyes and moaned pitifully as the sub leveled off at periscope depth. With stubby fingers the gnarled, neckless creature pulled at its yellow-stained, gray beard, staring up at the creaking pipes.

A thing of dark forest depths and hidden caves, Chris Turing thought as he watched the dwarf. *It wasn't meant for this place.*

Only men *would choose such a way to die, in a leaking steel coffin, on a hopeless attempt to blow up Valhalla.*

But then, it wasn't likely Loki's dwarf had had any choice in being here.

Why, Chris wondered suddenly — not for the first time. *Why do such creatures exist? Wasn't evil doing well enough in the world before* they *came to help it along?*

The engines rumbled, and Chris shrugged aside the thought. Even imagining a world without Aesir and their servants in it was by now as hard as remembering a time without war.

Chris sat strapped in his crash seat — he could hear the swishing of icy Baltic water just behind the tissue-thin bulkhead — and watched the gnome huddle atop a crate of hydrogen bomb parts. It drew its clublike feet up away from the sloshing brine on the deck, scrunching higher on the black box. Another moan escaped the dwarf as the *Razorfin*'s periscope went up, and more water gurgled in through the pressure-relief lines.

Major Marlowe looked up from

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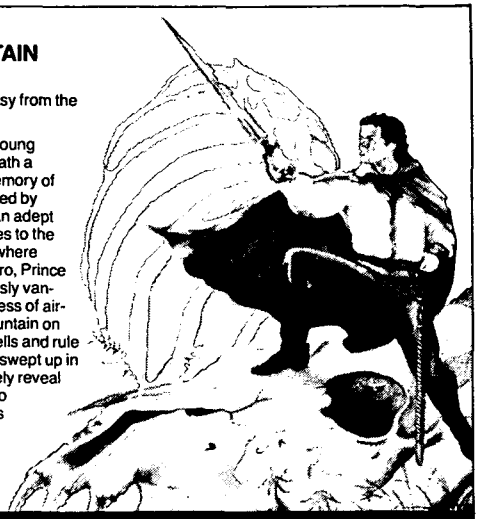

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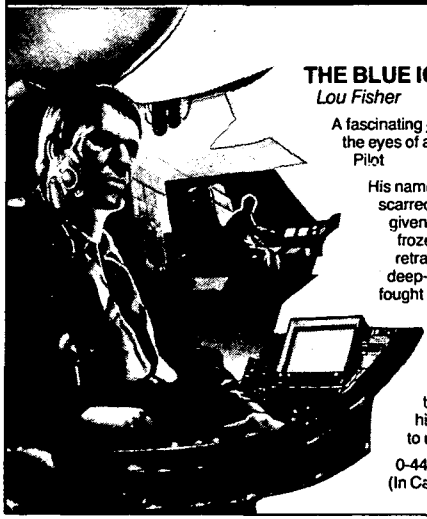

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the assault rifle he was reassembling for the thirtieth time. "What's eating the damn dwarf now?" the marine officer asked.

Chris shook his head. "Search me. The fact that he's out of his element, maybe? After all, the ancient Norse thought of the deep as a place for sunken boats and fishes."

"I thought you were some sort of expert on the Aesir. And you aren't even sure why the thing is foaming at the mouth like that?"

Chris could only shrug and repeat himself. "I said I don't know. Why don't you go over and ask him yourself?"

Marlowe gave Chris a sour glance, as if to say that he didn't much care for the joke. "Sidle up to that stench and ask Loki's damn *dwarf* to explain its *feelings?* Hmmph. I'd rather spit in an Aes's eye."

From his left, Chris's assistant, Zap O'Leary, leaned out and grinned at Marlowe. "Dig it, daddyo," O'Leary said to the marine. "There's an Aes over by the scope, dope. Be my guest. Write him runes in his spittoon." The eccentric technician gestured over toward the navy men, clustered around the sub's periscope. Next to the skipper stood a hulking figure clad in furs and leather, towering over the submariners.

Marlowe blinked back at O'Leary in bewilderment. The marine did not seem offended as much as confused. "What did he say?" he asked Chris.

Chris wished he weren't seated between the two. "Zap suggests that you test it by spitting in *Loki's* eye."

Marlowe grimaced. O'Leary might as well have suggested he stick his hand into a scram-jet engine. At that moment one of the marines crammed into the passageway behind them made the mistake of dropping a cartridge into the foul leak-water underfoot. Marlowe vented his frustration on the poor grunt in richly inventive profanity.

The dwarf moaned again, eyes darting, hugging his knees against the straps holding him onto the hermetically sealed crate.

Wherever they're from, they aren't used to submarines, Chris thought. *And these so-called dwarfs sure don't like water.*

Chris wondered how Loki had managed to persuade this one to come along on this suicide mission.

Probably threatened to turn him into a toad, he speculated, *I wouldn't put it past Loki.*

It was a desperate venture they were engaged in. In late 1962 there was very little time left for what remained of the Alliance against Nazism. If anything at all could be done this autumn, to stave off the inevitable, it would be worth the gamble.

Even Loki — bearlike, nearly invulnerable, and always booming forth laughter that sent chills down human spines — had betrayed nerves earlier,

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as the *Razorfin* dropped from the belly of a screaming B-65, sending their stomachs whirling as the arrow-sub plummeted like a great stone into Neptune's icy embrace.

Chris had to admit that *he* would have been sick, had that brief, seemingly endless fall lasted any longer. The crash and shriek of tortured metal when they hit was almost a relief, after that.

And anything seemed an improvement over the long, screeching trip over the Pole, skirting Nazi missiles, skimming mountains and gray waters in lurching zigs and zags, helplessly listening, strapped into place, as the airmen swooped their flying coffins thither and yon . . . praying that the enemy's Aesir masters weren't patrolling that section of the north that night . . . .

Of twenty sub-carriers sent out together from Baffin Island, only six had made it all the way to the waters between Sweden and Finland. And both *Cetus* and *Tigerfish* had broken up on impact with the water, tearing like ripped sardine cans and spilling their hapless crews into freezing death.

Only four subs left, Chris thought.

Still, he reminded himself, *our chances may be slim, but those poor pilots are the real heroes.* He doubted even one of the crews would make it across dark, deadly Europe to Tehran and safety.

"Captain Turing!"

Chris looked up as the skipper called his name. Commander Lewis had lowered the periscope and moved over to the chart table.

"Be right with you, Commander." Chris unstrapped and stepped down into the brine.

"Tell 'em we're savin' our own hooch for ourselves." O'Leary advised him, sotto voce. "Good pot is too rare to share."

"Shut up, fool," Marlowe growled. Chris ignored both of them as he sloshed forward. The skipper awaited him, standing beside their "friendly adviser," the alien creature calling himself Loki.

I've known Loki for years, Chris thought. *I've fought alongside him against his Aesir brothers . . . and* still *be scares the living hell out of me every time I look at him.*

Towering over everyone else, Loki regarded Chris enigmatically with fierce black eyes. The "God of Tricks" looked very much like a man, albeit an unnaturally large and powerful one. But those eyes belied the impression of humanity. Chris had spent enough time with Loki, since the renegade Aes defected to the Allied side, to have learned to avoid looking into them whenever possible.

"Sir," he said, nodding to Commander Lewis and the bearded Aesir. "I take it we're approaching point Y?"

"That's correct," the skipper said.

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"We'll be there in about twenty minutes, barring anything unforeseen."

Lewis seemed to have aged over the past twenty hours. The young sub commander knew that his squadron wasn't the only thing considered ex pendable in this operation. Several thousand miles to the west, the better part of what remained of the United States Surface Navy was engaged hopelessly for one reason only — to distract the Kriegsmarine and the SS and especially a certain "God of the Sea" away from the Baltic and Opera tion Ragnarok. Loki's cousin Tyr wasn't very potent against submarines, but unless his attention was drawn elsewhere, he could make life hell for them when their tiny force tried to land.

So tonight, instead, he would be making hell for American and Canadian and Mexican sailors, far away.

Chris shied away from thinking about it. Too many boys were going to their deaths off Labrador, just to keep one alien creature occupied while four subs tried to sneak in through the back door.

"Thank you. I'd better tell Marlowe and my demolition team." He turned to go, but was stopped by an outsized hand on his arm, holding him gently but with steel-like adamancy.

"Thou must know something more," the being called Loki said in a low, resonant voice. Impossibly white teeth shone in that gleaming smile above Chris. "Thou wilt have a passenger in going ashore."

Chris blinked. The *plan* had been for only his team and their commando escort . . . . Then he saw the pallor of dread on Commander Lewis's face — deeper than any mere fear of death.

Chris turned back to stare at the fur-clad giant. *"You . . ."* he breathed.

Loki nodded. "That is correct. There will be a slight change in plans. I will not accompany the undersea vessels as they attempt to break out through the Skagerrak. I will go ashore with thee, to Gotland."

Chris kept his face blank. In all honesty, there was no way this side of Heaven that he or Lewis or anybody else could stop this creature from doing anything it wanted to do. One way or the other, the Allies were about to lose their only Aesir friend in the long war against the Nazi plague.

If the world *friend* ever really described Loki — who had appeared one day on the tarmac of a Scottish airfield during the final evacuation of Britain, accompanied by eight small, bearded beings carrying boxes — who led them up to the nearest amazed officer to imperiously commandeer the prime minister's personal plane to take him the rest of the way to America.

Perhaps an armored battalion might have stopped him. Battle reports had proved that Aesir could be killed, if you were real lucky and

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pounded one hard and fast enough. But when the local commander realized what was happening, he had decided to take a chance.

Loki had proved his worth over and over again since that day, ten years ago.

Until now, that is.

"If you insist," Chris told the Aes. "I do. It is my will."

"Then I'll go explain it to Major Marlowe. Excuse me please."

He backed away a few meters first, then turned to go. As he sloshed away, that glittering stare seemed to follow him, past the moaning dwarf, past O'Leary's ever-sardonic smile, down the narrow, dank passageway lined with strapped-in marines, all the way to the sabot-launching tubes.

Voices were hushed. All the young men spoke English, but only half were North Americans. Their shoulder patches — Free French, Free Russian, Free Irish, German Christian — were muted in the dim light, but the mixed accents were unmistakable, as well as the way they stroked their weapons and the gleam Chris caught sight of in one or two pairs of eyes.

These were the sort that volunteered for suicide missions, the type — common in the world after thirteen years of horrible war — that had little or nothing left to lose.

Major Marlowe had come back to supervise the loading of the landing boats. He did not take Chris's news well.

"Loki wants to come along? To *Gotland?*" He spat. "The bastard's a *spy*. I knew it all the time!"

Chris shook his head. "He's helped us in a hundred ways, John. Why, just by accompanying Ike to Tokyo, and convincing the Japanese . . ."

"Big deal! We'd already *beaten* the Japs!" The big marine clenched his fist, hard. "Like we'd have *crushed* Hitler, if these monsters hadn't arrived, like Satan's curse, out of nowhere.

"And now he's lived among us for *ten years,* observing our methods, our tactics, and our *technology,* the only real advantage we had left!"

Chris grimaced. How could he explain it to Marlowe? The marine officer had never been to Tehran, as Chris had, only last year. Marlowe had never seen the capital city of Israel-Iran, America's greatest and most stalwart ally, bulwark of the East.

There, in dozens of armed settlements along the east bank of the Euphrates, Chris had met fierce men and women who bore on their arms tattooed numbers from Treblinka, Dachau, Auschwitz. He had heard their story of how, one hopeless night under barbed wire and the stench of chimneys, the starving, doomed masses had looked up to see a strange vapor fall from the sky. Unbelieving, death-starkened eyes had stared in wonderment as the mists gathered and coalesced into something that

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seemed almost solid.

Out of that eerie fog, a *bridge* of many colors formed . . . a rainbow arch climbing, apparently without end, out of the places of horror into a moonless night. And from the heights, each doomed man and woman saw a dark-eyed figure on a flying horse ride down. They felt him whisper to them *inside* their minds.

Come, children, while your tormentors blink unbelievingly in my web of the mind, Come, all, unto my bridge to safety, before my cousins descry my treason.

When they sank to their knees, or rocked in thankful prayer, the figure only snorted in derision. His voice hissed within their heads.

Do not mistake me for your God, who left you here to die! I cannot explain that One's absence to you, or His plan in all this. The Allfather is a mystery even to Great Odin!

Know only that I will take you to safety now, such as there may be in this world. But only if you hurry! Come, and be grateful later, if you must!

Down to the camps, to bleak ghettos, to a city under siege — the bridges formed in a single night, and with dawn were gone like vapor or a dream. Two million people — the old, the lame, women, children, the slaves of Hitler's war factories— climbed those paths, for there was no other choice, and found themselves transported to a desert land, by the banks of an ancient river.

They arrived just in time to take up hasty arms and save a British army fleeing the wreckage of Egypt and Palestine. They fused with the astonished Persians, and with refugees from crippled Russia, and together they built a new nation out of chaos.

That was why Loki appeared on the tarmac in Scotland, shortly after that night of miracles. He could not return to Europe, for the fury of his Aesir kin would be savage. In returning to Gotland today, he was certainly in as much peril as the commandos.

"No, Marlowe. Loki's not a spy. I haven't any idea what on God's green Earth he *is*. But I'd bet my life he's not a spy."

2.

The sabots gurgled and rocked as they shot free of the submarine and bobbed to the surface of the cold sea. The outer shells broke away, and the sailors dipped their oars. The men all took their first breath of clean air in more than a day.

Loki's dwarf seemed little relieved. He looked across the dark waters to the west, where the thin reddish line of sunset outlined the hills of a great Baltic island, and muttered gutturally in a language like nothing Earthly.

Which was only natural. Like most Americans, Chris was convinced that these beings were as much the an-

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cient Norse gods — recalled into the modern world — as *he* was Sandy Koufax, or that they didn't play baseball in Brooklyn.

Aliens — that was the official line . . . the story broadcast by Allied Radio all through the Americas and Japan and what remained of Free Asia. Creatures from the stars had arrived, as in those stories by Chester Nimitz, the famous science fiction author.

It wasn't hard to imagine why they might want to be looked on as gods. And it explained why they had chosen to side with the Nazis. After all, the ruse would not have worked in the West, where, no matter how great their guests' powers, Euro-American scientists would have probed and queried and people would have asked questions.

But in the Teutonic madness of Nazism, the "Aesir" had found fertile ground.

Chris had read captured German SS documents. Even back in the thirties and early forties, before the arrival of the Aesir, they had been filled with mumbo jumbo and pseudoreligious mysticism — stuff about ice moons falling from the sky and the romantic spirit of the Aryan super race.

A Nazi-conquered world would *belong* to the Aesir, whoever and whatever they were. They would be gods indeed. Much as he understood the logic of a rat or a hyena, Chris could follow the aliens' reasons for choosing the side they had, God damn them.

Silhouettes of pines outlined the hilltops, serrating the still faintly glowing western sky. The two lead boats were crammed with marines, who were to take the beachhead and move inland to scout. The flankers were navy teams, who were supposed to prepare the boats for a getaway . . . as if anyone believed that would ever happen.

The last two craft held most of Chris's demolition team.

Loki knelt on one knee at the prow of Chris's boat, and stared ahead with those black, glittering eyes. Dark as he was, he nevertheless looked at that moment like something straight out of a Viking saga.

Good verisimilitude, Chris thought. Or maybe the creatures actually *believed* they were what they said they were. Who could tell?

All Chris knew for sure was that they had to be defeated, or for humanity there would be nothing but darkness, from now on.

He checked his watch and looked up at the sky, scanning the broad, starry openings in the clouds.

Yes, there it was. The Satellite. Riding Newton's wings more than two hundred miles up, circling the globe every ninety minutes.

When it had appeared, the Nazis had gone into paroxysms, proclaiming it an astrological portent. For some unknown bureaucratic reason, offi-

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cials in the Pentagon had sat on the secret until half the world believed Goebbels's propaganda. Then, at last, Washington revealed the truth. That American space-argonauts were circling the Earth.

For two months the world had seemed turned around. This new technological wonder would be more important than the atom bomb, many thought.

Then the invasion of Canada began.

Chris turned his mind away from what was happening now, out in the Atlantic. He wished he had one of those new *laser* communicators, so he could tell the men up in the Satellite how things were progressing. But the light-amplification devices were so secret, as yet, that the Chiefs of Staff had refused to allow any to be taken into the enemy heartland.

Supposedly the Nazis were working on a way to shoot down the Satellite. It was still a mystery why, with aliens to help them, the enemy had let their early lead in rocketry slip so badly. Chris wondered why the Aesir had allowed the American satellite to fly up there as long as this.

Perhaps they can't really operate up there anymore . . . like they haven't been able to crush our submarine forces.

But does that make sense? Could aliens have lost the ability to destroy such a crude spacecraft?

Chris shook his head.

Not that it matters all that much, he thought. *Tonight the Atlantic fleet is dying. This winter we'll probably be forced to use the big bombs to hold the line in Canada . . . wrecking the continent even if we slow them down.*

He looked at the figure in the boat's prow. *How can cleverness or industry or courage prevail against such power?*

Those fur-covered shoulders were passive now. But Chris had seen them tear down buildings with the Aes's bare hands. And Loki had admitted to being one of the *weakest* of these "gods."

"Loki," he said quietly.

As often as not, the Aes would ignore any human who spoke to him without his leave. But this time the dark-haired figure turned and regarded Chris. Loki's expression was not warm, but he did smile.

"Thou art troubled, youngling. I spy it in thy heart." He seemed to peer into Chris. "it is not fear, I am glad to see, but only a great perplexity."

Fitting their assumed roles as the fabled lords of Valhalla, courage was the one human attribute most honored by the Aesir. Even by the god of trickery and treachery.

"Thank you, Loki." Chris nodded respectfully. *You could've fooled me. I thought I was scared spitless!*

Loki's eyes were pools glittering with starlight. "On this fateful eve, it

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is meet to grant a brave worm a boon. Therefore I will favor thee, mortal. Ask three questions. These will Loki answer truthfully, by his very life."

Chris blinked, for the moment stricken speechless. He was unprepared for anything like this! Everyone from President Marshall and Admiral Heinlein on down had hungered for answers. Imperious and aloof, their one Aesir ally had doled out hints and clues, had helped to foil Nazi schemes and slow the implacable enemy advance, but he had never made a promise like this!

Chris could sense O'Leary tense behind him, trying to seem invisible in order to be allowed to stay and listen. For once the beatnik's mouth was firmly sealed.

Pine forests loomed above them as the boat entered shallows out of the evening wind. He could smell the dark forest. There was so little time! Chris groped for a question.

"I . . . who *are* you, and where did you *come* from?"

Loki closed his eyes. When he opened them, the black orbs were filled with dark sadness.

Out of the body of Ymir, slain by Odein, *poured the Sea.*
Gripping the body of Ymir, Yggdrasil, *the great tree.*
Sprung from salt and frost, the Aesir, *tremble Earth!*
Borne of Giant and man, Loki, *bringer of mirth.*

The creature stared at Chris. "This has always been my home," he said. And Chris knew that he meant the Earth. "I remember ages and everything spoken of in the Eddas — from the chaining of Fenrir to the lies of Skrymir. And yet . . ." Loki's voice was faintly puzzled, even hushed. "And yet there is something about those memories . . . something *laid over,* as lichen lays upon the frost."

He shook himself. "In truth, I cannot say for certain that I am older than thee, child-man."

Loki's massive shoulders shrugged. "But make haste with your next question. We are approaching the Gathering Place. *They* will be here, and we must stop them from their scheming — if it is not already too late."

Reminded suddenly of the present, Chris looked up at the wilderness looming all around them on the shadowed hillsides. "Are you sure about this plan — taking on so many of the Aesir in one place?"

Loki smiled. And Chris realized at once why. Like some idiot out of a fairy tale, he had squandered a question in a silly quest for comfort! But reassurance was not one of Loki's strong suits.

"No, I am *not* sure, impertinent mortal!" Loki laughed, and the rowing sailors briefly lost their stride as they looked up at the ironic, savage sound. "Think thou that only men may win honor by daring all against death? Here does *Loki* show his cour-

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age, to face Odin's spear and Thor's hammer if he must, tonight!" He turned and shook a ham-sized fist toward the west. The dwarf whimpered and crouched beside his master.

Chris saw that the marines had already landed. Major Marlowe made quick hand gestures, sending the first skirmishers fanning out into the forest. The second row of boats shipped oars and were carried by momentum toward the gravelly shore.

He hurried to take advantage of the remaining time.

"Loki. What is happening in Africa?"

Since '49 the Dark Continent had been dark indeed. From Tunis to the Cape of Good Hope, fires burned, and rumors of horror flowed.

Loki whispered softly.

Surt must needs have a home, before the time of raging.
There, in torment, men cry out, screaming for an ending.

The giant shook his great head. "In Africa and on the great plains of Russia, terrible magics are being made, small one, and terrible woe."

Back in Israel-Iran, Chris had seen some of the refugees — blacks and high-cheeked Slavs — lucky escapees who had fled the fires in time. Even they had not been able to tell what was happening in the interior. Only people who had seen the earlier horrors — whose arms bore stenciled numbers from the first wave of chimney camps — could imagine what was happening in the silent continents. And those fierce men and women kept their silence.

It struck Chris that Loki did not seem to speak out of pity, but matter-of-factly, as if he thought a ***mistake*** was being made, but not any particular evil.

"Terrible magics . . ." Chris repeated. And suddenly he had a thought. "You mean the purpose isn't *only* to slaughter people? That something else is going on, as well? Is it related to the reason you saved those people from the first camps? Was something being done to them?"

Chris had a sense that there was something important here. Something ultimately crucial. But Loki smiled, holding up three fingers.

"No more questions. It is time."

The boat scraped bottom. Sailors leapt out into the icy water to drag it up to the rocky shore. Shortly Chris was busy supervising the unloading of their supplies, but his mind was a turmoil.

Loki was hiding something, laughing at him for having come so close and yet missing the target. There was more to this, tonight, than an attempt to kill a few alien gods.

High in the dark forest canopy, a crow cawed scratchily. The dwarf, laden under enough boxes to crush a man, rolled his eyes and moaned softly, but Loki seemed not to notice.

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"Reet freaking hideaway, daddyo," O'Leary muttered as he helped Chris shoulder the bomb's fuse mechanism. "A heavy-duty scene."

"Right," Chris answered, feeling sure he understood the beatnik this time. "A heavy-duty scene." They set out, following the faint blazings laid by the marine scouts.

As they climbed a narrow trail from the beach, Chris felt a growing sense of anticipation growing within him . . . a feeling of being, right then, at the navel of the world. For well or ill, this place was where the fate of the world hung. He could think of no better end than to sear this island clean of all life. And if that meant standing beside the bomb and triggering it himself, well, few men ever had the chance to trade their lives so well.

They were deep under the forest canopy now. Chris caught sight of flickering movements under the trees, marine flankers guarding them and their precious cargo. According to prewar maps, they had only to top one rise, then another. From that prominence, anyplace to plant the bomb would be as good as any other.

Chris started to turn, to look back at Loki . . . but at that very moment, the night erupted with light. Flares popped and fizzed and floated slowly through the branches on tiny parachutes. Men dove for cover as tracer bullets sent their shadows fleeing. There was sudden gunfire up ahead, and loud concussions. Men screamed.

Chris sought cover behind a towering fir as mortars began pounding the forest around him.

From high up the hillside — even over the explosions — they heard booming laughter.

Clutching the roots of a tree, Chris looked back. A dozen yards away, the dwarf lay flat on his back, a smoking ruin where a mortar round must have landed squarely.

But then he felt a hand on his shoulder. O'Leary pointed up the hill and whispered, goggle-eyed, "Dig it, man."

Chris turned and stared upslope at the huge, manlike being striding down the hillside, followed by dark-cloaked, armed men. The figure carried a giant bludgeon that screamed whenever he threw it, crushing trees and marines without prejudice. Giant conifers exploded into kindling, and men were turned into jam. Then the weapon swept back into the red-bearded Aes's hand.

Not mortars. Chris realized. *Thor's hammer.*

Of Loki himself, there was no sign at all.

3.

"There there, Hugin. Fear not the dark Americans. They shall not hurt thee."

The one-eyed being called Odin sat upon a throne of ebony, bearing

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upon his upraised left hand a raven the same color as night. A jewel set in the giant's eye patch glittered like an orb more far-seeing than the one he had lost, and across his lap lay a shining spear.

On both sides stood fur-clad figures nearly as imposing, one blond, with a great ax laid arrogantly over his shoulder, the other red-bearded, leaning lazily on a hammer the size of a normal man.

Guards in black leather, twin lightning strokes at their collars, stood at attention around the hall of rough-hewn timbers. Even their rifles were polished black. The only spot of color on their SS uniforms was a red swastika armband.

The being called Odin looked down at the prisoners, chained together in a heap on the floor of the great hall.

"Alas. Poor Hugin has not forgiven you, my American guests. His brother, Munin, was lost when Berlin burned under your Hellfire bombs."

The Aesir chief's remaining eye gleamed ferally. "And who can blame my poor watch-bird, or fail to understand a father's grief, when the same flame deluge consumed my bright boy, my far-seeing Heimdall."

The survivors of the ill-fated raiding party lay on the dry stone floor, exhausted. The unconscious, dying Major Marlowe was in no condition to answer for them, but one of the Free British volunteers stood up, rattling his chains, and spat on the floor in front of the manlike creature.

"Higgins!" O'Leary tried to pull on the man's arm, but was shrugged off as the Brit shook his fist.

"Yeah, they got your precious boy in Berlin. An' you killed *everyone* in London an' Paris in revenge! I say the Yanks were too soft, lettin' that stop 'em. They shoulda gone ahead, *whatever* the price, an' fried every last Aryan bitch an' cub . . ."

His defiance was cut off as a Gestapo officer knocked him down. SS troopers brought their rifle butts down hard, again and again.

Finally Odin waved them back.

"Take the body to the center of the Great Circle, to be sent to Valhalla."

The Gestapo officer looked up sharply, but Odin rumbled in a tone that assumed obedience. "I want that brave man with me, when Fimbul-Winter blows," the creature explained. And obviously he thought that settled the matter. As the black-uniformed guards cut the limp form free, the chief of the Aesir chucked his raven under the beak and offered it a morsel of meat. He spoke to the huge redhead standing beside him.

"Thor, my son. These other things are thine. Poor prizes, I admit, but they did show some prowess in following the Liar this far. What will thou do with them?"

The giant stroked his hammer with gauntlets the size of small dogs. Here,

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indeed, was a creature that made even Loki seem small.

He stepped forward and scanned the prisoners, as if searching for something. When his gaze alighted on Chris, it seemed to shimmer. His voice was as deep as the growling of earthquakes.

"I will deign to speak with one or two of them, Father."

"Good." Odin nodded. "Have them cast into a pit somewhere," he told the SS general nearby, who clicked his heels and bowed low. "And await my son's pleasure."

The Nazis hauled Chris and the other survivors to their feet and pulled them away, single file. But not before Chris overheard the elder Aes tell his offspring, "Find out what you can about the wolf-spawn, Loki, and then give them all over to be used in the sacrifice."

4.

Poor Major Marlowe had been right about one thing. The Nazis would never have won without the Aesir, or something like them. Hitler and his gang must have believed from the start that they could somehow call forth the ancient "gods," or they'd surely never have dared wage such a war, one certain to bring in America.

Indeed, by early 1944 it had seemed all but over. There was hell yet to pay, of course, but nobody back home feared defeat anymore. The Russians were pushing in from the east. Rome was taken, and the Mediterranean was an Allied lake. The Japanese were crumbling — pushed back or bottled up on island after island — while the greatest armada in history was gathering in England, preparing to cross the Channel and lance the Nazi boil for good and all.

In factories and shipyards across America, the Arsenal of Democracy was pouring forth more matériel in any given month than the Third Reich had produced in its best year. Ships rolled off the ways at intervals of hours. Planes every few minutes.

Most important of all, in Italy and in the Pacific, a rabble of farmers and city boys in soldier suits had been tempered and become warriors in a great army. Man to man, they were now on a par with their experienced foe. And the enemy was outnumbered as well.

Already there was talk of the postwar recovery, of plans to help in the rebuilding, and of a *United Nations* to keep the peace forever.

Chris had been only a child in knee pants, back in '44, devouring Chet Nimitz novels and praying with all his might that there would be something half as glorious to do in his adulthood as what his uncles were achieving overseas right then. Maybe there would be adventures in space, he hoped, for after this, the horror of war would surely never be allowed again.

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Then came the rumors . . . tales of setbacks on the eastern front . . . of reeling Soviet armies sent into sudden and unexpected retreat. The reasons were unclear . . . mostly, what came back were superstitious rumblings that no modern person credited.

Voices on a street corner.

Damn Russkies . . . I knew all along they didn' have no stayin' power . . . Alla time yammerin' 'bout a "second front." . . . Well, we'll give *'em a second front! Save their bash. . . . Don't fret, Ivan, Uncle Sam's coming . . .*

June, and the Norman sky was filled with planes. Ships covered the English Channel . . .

Sitting against a cold stone wall in an underground cell, Chris pinched his eyes shut and tried to crush away the memory of the grainy black-and-white films he had been shown. But he failed to keep the images out.

Ships, as far as one could see . . . the greatest armada of free man ever assembled . . .

It was not until he joined the OSS that Chris actually saw photographs never shown to the public. In all the years since then, he wished *he* had not seen them, either.

D-Day . . . D for disaster.

Cyclones, hundreds of them, spinning like horrible tops, rising out of the dawn mists. They grew and climbed until the dark funnels appeared to stretch beyond the sky. And as they approached the ships, it seemed one could see flying figures on their flanks, driving the storms faster and faster with their beating wings . . .

"Marlowe's come up aces and eights, man." O'Leary sighed heavily as he sagged down next to Chris. "You're the big cheese now, dad."

Chris closed his eyes. *All men die,* he thought, reminding himself that he hadn't really liked the dour marine all that much, anyway.

He mourned nonetheless, if for no other reason than that Marlowe had been his insulation, protecting him from that bitch called "command."

"So what gives now, Chief?"

Chris looked at O'Leary. The man was really too old to be playing kids' games. There were lines at the edges of those doelike eyes, and the baby fat was turning into a double chin. The army recognized genius, and put up with a lot from its civilian experts. But Chris wondered — not for the first time — how this escapee from Greenwich Village had ever come to be in a position of responsibility.

Loki chose him. That was the real answer. *Like he chose me. So much for the God of Cleverness.*

"What *gives* is that you damp down the beat-rap, O'Leary. Making only every third sentence incomprehensible should be enough to provide

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your emotional crutch."

O'Leary winced, and Chris at once regretted the outburst.

"Oh, never mind." He changed the subject. "How are the rest of the men doing?"

"Copacetic, I guess . . . I mean, they're O.K., for guys slated for ritual shortening in a few hours. They all knew this was a suicide mission. Just wanted to take a few more of the bastards with them, is all."

Chris nodded. *If we'd had another year or two . . .*

By then the missile scientists would have had rockets accurate enough to go for a surgical strike, making this attempt to sneak in bombs under the enemy's noses unnecessary. The Satellite was just the beginning of the possibilities, if they had had the time.

"Higgins was right, man," O'Leary muttered as he collapsed against the wall next to Chris. "We shoulda pasted them with everything we had. Melted Europe to slag, if that's what it took."

"By the time we had enough bombs to do much more than slow them down, they had atomic weapons, too," Chris pointed out.

"So? After we fried Peenemünde, their delivery systems stagnated. And they haven't got a clue how to go thermonuclear! Why, even if they *did* manage to disassemble our bomb—"

"— God forbid!" Chris blinked. His heart raced, even considering the possibility. If the Nazis managed to make the leap from A-bombs to fusion weapons . . .

The tech shook his head vigorously. "I scoped . . . I mean, I checked out the destruct triggers myself, Chris. Anyone pokes around to try to see how a U.S. of A. type H-bomb works will be in for a nasty surprise."

That had, of course, been a minimum requirement before being allowed to attempt this mission. Had they been able to assemble the weapon near the "Great Circle" of Asgard, the course of the war might have been changed. Now all they could hope was that the separate components would melt to slag as they were supposed to when their timers expired.

O'Leary persisted. "I still think we should have launched everything we had back in '52."

Chris knew how the man felt. Most Americans believed the exchange would have been worth it. A full-scale strike at Hitler's homeland would sear the heart out of it. The monster's retaliation, with cruder rockets and fissile bombs, would be a price worth paying.

When he had learned the real reason, at first he had refused to believe it. Chris assumed that Loki was lying . . . that it was an Aesir trick.

But since then he had seen the truth, America's arsenal of bombs was a two-edged sword. Unless used carefully, it would cut both ways.

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There was a rattling of keys. Three SS guards stepped in, looking down their noses at the dejected Allied raiders.

"The great Aes, Thor, would deign speak wit' your leader," the officer said in thickly accented English. When no one moved, his gaze fell upon Chris and he smiled. "This one. This strayed sheep. Our lord asked for him, especially."

He snapped his fingers, and the guards grabbed Chris by the arms. "Cool as glass, dad," O'Leary said. "Drive 'em crazy, baby,"

Chris glanced back from the door. "You too, O'Leary."

He was pushed through and the dungeon gate slammed shut behind him.

5.

"You are a Dane, are you not?"

Chris was tied firmly to a beam pillar in front of a crackling fireplace. The Gestapo official peered at Chris from several angles before asking his question.

"Danish by ancestry. What of it?" Chris shrugged under his bonds.

The Nazi clucked. "Oh, nothing in particular. It is just that I never cease to be amazed when I find specimens of clearly superior stock fighting against their own divine heritage."

Chris lifted an eyebrow. "Do you interrogate a lot of prisoners?"

"Oh yes, very many."

"Well, then you must be amazed all the time."

The Gestapo man blinked, then smiled sourly. He stepped back to light a cigarette, and Chris noticed that his hands were trembling.

"But doesn't your very blood cry out, when you find yourself working with, going into battle alongside racial scum, mongrels . . ."

Chris laughed. He turned his head and regarded the Nazi icily.

"Why are you even here?" he asked.

"I — what do you mean?" The fellow blinked again. "See here now, I am in charge of interrogation of—"

"You're in charge of a jail detail," Chris sneered. "The priests of the Aesir run everything now. The mystics in the SS control the Reich. Hitler's a tottering old syphilitic they won't let out of Berchtesgaden. And you old-fashioned Nazis are barely tolerated anymore."

The officer sucked at his cigarette. "What do you mean by that remark?"

"I mean that all that racial claptrap was just window dressing. An excuse to set up the death camps. But the SS would've been just as happy to use Aryans in them, if that were the only way to — to . . ."

"Yes?" The Gestapo man stepped forward. "To do what? If the purpose of the camps was not the elimination of impure stock, then what, smart man? *What?*"

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There was a brittle, high-pitched edge to the man's laughter. "You do not know, do you? Even Loki did not tell you!"

Chris could have sworn that there was *disappointment* in the officer's eyes . . . as if he had hoped to learn something from Chris, and was let down to find out that his prisoner was as much in the dark as he was.

No, I wasted a question, and Loki did not tell me about the camps. Chris looked at the other man's trembling hands — hands that had, no doubt, wreaked more hell on broken bodies and spirits than bore contemplating — all, apparently, in a cause that was no longer even relevant to the winning side.

"Poor obsolete national socialist," Chris said. "Your dreams, mad as they were, were human ones. How does it feel to have it all taken over by aliens? To watch it all change beyond recognition?"

The Gestapo man reddened. Fumbling, he picked up a truncheon from a table near the wall and smacked it into his gloved left hand.

"I will change something *else* beyond recognition," he growled menacingly. "And if I am obsolete, at least I am still allowed the pleasure of my craft."

He approached, smiling with a thin film on his lips. Chris braced himself as the arm swung back, raising the bludgeon high. But at that moment the leather curtains parted and a large shadow fell across the rug. The Gestapo officer paled and snapped to attention.

The red-bearded Aes named Thor nodded briefly as he struggled out of his furred cloak. "You may go," he rumbled.

Chris did not even look at the Nazi as the interrogator tried to meet his eye. Chris watched the coals in the fireplace until the curtains swished again and he was alone with the alien.

Thor sat down, cross-legged, on a thick rug and spent a few minutes joining Chris in contemplation of the flickering flames. When he used his hammer to prod the logs, heat brought out fine, glowing designs in the massive iron head.

"Fro sends word from Vineland . . . from the sea thou callest Labrador. There has been a slaughter of many brave men."

Thor looked up.

"Those coward's tools — submarines — did much harm to our fleet. But in the end, Fro's tempests were masterful. The landing is secured."

Chris controlled the sinking feeling in his stomach. This was expected. Worse was to come, this winter.

Thor shook his head. "This is a bad war. Where is the honor, when thousands die unable even to show valor?"

Chris had more experience than most Americans in holding conversations with gods. Still, he took a

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chance, speaking without permission.

"I agree, Great One. But you can't blame *us* for that."

Thor's eyes glittered as he inspected Chris. "No, brave worm. I do not blame you. That you have used your flame weapons as little as you have speaks well for the pride of thy leaders. Or perhaps they know what our wrath would be, if they were so cowardly as to use them wantonly."

I never should have been allowed on this mission. I know too much, Chris realized. Loki had been the one to overrule High Command and insist that Chris come along. But that made him the only one here who knew the *real* reason the H-bombs had been kept leashed.

Dust from atom blasts and soot from burning cities — those were what Allied High Command feared, far more than radiation or Nazi retaliation. Already, from limited use of nuclear weapons so far, the weather had chilled measurably.

And the Aesir were so much stronger in winter! Scientists verified Loki's story, that careless use of the Allied nuclear advantage would lead to catastrophe, no matter how badly they seared the other side.

"We, too, prefer a more personal approach," Chris said, hoping to keep the Aes believing his own explanation. "No man wishes to be killed by powers beyond his understanding, impossible to resist or fight back against."

Thor's rumble, Chris realized, was a low laughter. "Well said, worm. Thou dost chastize as Frey does, with words that reap, even as they sow."

The Aes leaned forward a little. "You would earn merit in my eyes, small one, if you told me how to find the Brother of Lies."

Those gray eyes were like cold clouds, and Chris felt his sense of reality begin to waver as he looked into them. It took a powerful effort of will to tear his gaze away. Shutting his eyes, he spoke with a dry mouth.

"I . . . don't know what you're talking about."

The rumbling changed tone, deepening a little. Chris felt a rough touch and opened his eyes to see that Thor was brushing his cheek with the leather-bound haft of the great war hammer.

"Loki, youngling. Tell me where the Trickster may be found, and you may yet escape your doom, and even find a place by my side. In the world to come, there will be no greater place for a man."

This time Chris steeled himself to meet the hypnotic pools of Thor's eyes. Their power reached out for his soul, as a magnet for native iron. But Chris fought back with the savage heat of hatred.

"Not . . . for all the Valkyries in your fucking, alien pantheon," he whispered. "I'd rather run with the wolves."

The smile vanished. Thor blinked,

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and for a moment Chris thought he saw the Aes's image waver just a little, as if . . . as if he were looking through a man-shaped *fold* in space.

"Courage will not save thee from the wages of disrespect, worm," the shape growled, and solidified again into a full-clad giant.

All at once, Chris was glad to have known O'Leary.

"Don't you dig it yet, daddyo? I don't fucking *believe* in you! Wherever you're from, baby, they probably kicked you out!

"You may be mean enough to wreck our world, but everything about you screams that you're the *dregs,* man. Leaky squares. Probably burned out *papa's* stolen saucer just gettin' here!"

He shook his head. "I just refuse to believe in you, man."

The icy gray eyes blinked once. Then Thor's surprised expression faded into a smile. "I did not ken your other insults. But for calling me a *man,* you shall die before the morning sun."

He stood up and placed a hand on Chris's shoulder, as if imparting a friendly benediction, but even the casual power of that touch felt viselike.

"I only add this, little one. We Aesir have come *invited,* and we arrived not in ships — even ships between the stars — but on the wings of Death itself. This much, this boon of knowledge I grant thee, in honor of your defiance."

Then, in a swirl of furs and displaced air, the creature was gone, leaving Chris alone again to watch the coals flicker slowly and turn into ashes.

6.

The Teutonic priests were resplendent in red and black, their robes traced in gold and silver. Platinum eagles' wings rose from their top-heavy helms as they marched around a great circle of standing stones, chanting in a tongue that sounded vaguely German, but which Chris knew was much, much older.

An altar, carved with gaping dragons' mouths, stood beside a raging bonfire. Smoke rose in a turbulent funnel, carrying bright sparks upward toward a full moon. The heat blazed at the ring of prisoners, each chained to his own obelisk of rough-hewn rock.

They faced southward, looking from a Gotland prominence across the Baltic toward a shore that had once been Poland, and for a little while after that had been the "Thousand-Year Reich."

The waters were unnaturally calm, almost glassy, reflecting a nearly perfect image of the bonfire alongside the moon's rippling twin.

"Fro must be back from Labrador," O'Leary commented, loudly enough for Chris to hear him over the chanting and the pounding drums.

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"That'd explain the clear night. He's th' god of tempests."

Chris glanced at the man sourly, and O'Leary grinned back apologetically. "Sorry, man. I mean he's th' little green alien who's in charge of weather control. Make you feel any better?"

I had that coming. Chris thought. He smiled dryly and shrugged. "I don't suppose it matters all that much now."

O'Leary watched the Aryan Brothers march by again, carrying a giant swastika alongside a great dragonlike totem. The technician started to say something, but then he blinked and seemed to mumble to himself, as if trying to catch a drifting thought. When the procession had passed, he turned to Chris, a mystified expression on his face. "I just remembered something."

Chris sighed. "What is it now, O'Leary?"

The beatnik frowned in puzzlement. "I can't figure why it slipped my mind until now. But back when we were on the beach, unloading the bomb parts, old Loki pulled me aside. It was all so hectic, but I could swear I saw him palm th' H-bomb trigger mechanism, Chris. That means . . ."

Chris nodded. "That means he knew we were going to be captured. I'd already figured that out, O'Leary. At least the Nazis won't get the trigger."

"Yeah. But that's not all I just remembered, Chris. Loki told me to *tell* you something for him. He said you'd asked him a question, and he told me to relay an answer he said you might understand."

O'Leary shook his head. "I don't know why I forgot to tell you about it until now."

Chris laughed. Of course the renegade Aes had put the man under a posthypnotic command to recall the message only later . . . perhaps only in a situation like this.

"What is it, O'Leary?" What did he say to tell me?"

"It was just one word, Chris. He said to tell you — *necromancy.* And then he clammed up. Wasn't much after that that the SS jumped us. What'd he mean by that, Captain? What was your question, anyway? What does it mean?"

Chris did not reply. He stared at the funnel of sparks climbing toward the moon.

With his last question he had asked Loki about the camps — about the awesome, horrible, concentrated effort of death that had been perpetrated, first in Europe and then in Russia and Africa. What were they *for?* There had to be more to it than a plan to eliminate some bothersome minorities.

Moreover, why had Loki, who normally seemed so oblivious to human life, acted to rescue so many from the death factories, at so great a risk to himself?

Necromancy. That was Loki's de-

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layed reply to his final question. And Loki had told it in such a way that Chris might have his answer, but never be able to tell anyone who mattered.

Necromancy . . .

The word stood for the performance of magic . . . but magic of a special, terrible kind. In legend, a necromancer was an evil wizard who used the concentrated field created by the death agony of human beings in order to drive his spells.

But that was just superstitious nonsense!

Light-headed, Chris looked out across the sand at the hulking Aesir, seated on their gilded thrones, heard the chanting of the priests, and wished he could dismiss the idea as easily as he once would have.

Was that the reason the Nazis had dared to wage a war they otherwise could never have won? Because they believed that they could create such concentrated, distilled horror that ancient spells would actually work?

It explained so much. Other nations had gone insane, in human history. Other movements had been evil. But none had perpetrated such crimes with such dedication and efficiency. The horror must have been directed not so much at death itself, but at some hideous goal beyond death!

"They . . . *made* . . . the Aesir. That's what Loki meant by thinking that maybe his own memories were false . . . when he suspected that he was actually no older than I . . ."

"What was that, Cap'n?" O'Leary leaned as far as his chains would allow. "I couldn't follow . . ."

But the procession chose that moment to stop. The high priest, carrying a golden sword, held it before Odin's throne. The father of the "gods" touched it, and the Aes's rumbling chant could be heard, lower than human singing, like a growl that trembled within the Earth.

One of the chained Allies — a Free Briton — was dragged, numbed with dread, from his obelisk toward the fire before the dragon altar.

Chris shut his eyes, as if to hold out the screams. "Jesus!" O'Leary hissed.

Yes, Chris thought. *Invoke Jesus. Or Allah. Or God of Abraham. Wake Up, Brahma! For your dream has turned into a nightmare.*

He understood clearly now why Loki had not told him his answer while there was even an infinitesimal chance that he might ever make it home again alive.

Thank you, Loki.

Better America and the Last Alliance should go down fighting honorably than even be tempted by this knowledge . . . to have its will tested by this *way out.* For if the Allies ever tried to adopt the enemy's methods, there would be nothing left in the soul of humanity to fight for.

Whom would we conjure, Chris wondered, *if we ever did use those spells? Superman? Or Captain Mar-*

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vel? Oh, they'd be more than a match for the Aesir, certainly! Our myths were boundless.

He laughed, and the sound turned into a sob as another scream of agony pierced the night.

Thank you, Loki, for sparing us that test of our souls.

He had no idea where the renegade "trickster god" had gone, or whether this debacle had been only a cloak for some deeper, more secret mission.

Could that be? Chris wondered. He knew that it was possible, yet. Soldiers seldom ever saw the big picture, and President Marshall did not have to tell his OSS captains everything. This mission could just have been a feint, a minor piece in a greater plan.

Lasers and satellites . . . they could be just part of it. There might be silver bullets . . . a sprig of mistletoe, yet.

Chains rattled to his right. He heard a voice cursing in Portuguese, and footsteps dragging the latest prisoner off.

Chris looked up at the sky, and a thought suddenly occurred to him, as if out of nowhere.

Legends begin in strange ways, he realized.

Someday — even if there were no silver bullet — the horror would have to ebb at last. When humans grew scarce, perhaps, and the Aesir were less plump and well fed on the death manna they supped from charnel houses.

Then there would come a time when human heroes would count for something again. Perhaps in secret laboratories, or in exile on the moon, or at the bottom of the sea, free men and women would work and toil to build the armor, the weapons, maybe the heroes themselves . . .

This time the scream was choked, as if the Brazilian ranger were trying to defy his enemies, and broke only to show his agony at the last.

Footsteps approached. To his amazement, Chris felt feather-light, as if gravity were barely enough to keep him on the ground.

"So long, O'Leary," he said distantly.

"Yeah, man. Stay cool."

Chris nodded. He offered the black- and silver-clad SS his wrists as they unchained him, and said to them softly, in a friendly tone of voice, "You know, you look pretty silly for grown men."

They blinked at him in surprise. Chris smiled and stepped between them, leading the way toward the altar and the waiting Aesir.

Someday men will challenge these monsters, he thought, knowing that the numb light-headed feeling meant that he would not scream . . . that nothing they could do would make him take more than casual notice.

Loki had made certain of this. *This* was why the Trickster had spent so

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much time with Chris, this past year . . . why he had insisted that Chris come along on this mission.

Our day will come. Revenge will drive our descendants. Science will armor them. But those heroes will need one more thing, he realized. *Heroes need inspiration. They need legends.*

On their way toward the humming Aesir, they passed before a row of human "dignitaries" from the Reich, a few with faces glazed in excitement, but others sitting numbly, as if lost. He felt he could almost read the despair in those darkened, mad eyes. They were aware that something they had wrought had gone long, long out of their control.

Thor frowned as Chris flashed him a smile. "Hi, how'ya doin'?" he said to the Aesir, interrupting their grumbling music in a muttering of surprise. Where curses and screams had only resonated with the chant, his good-natured sarcasm broke up the ritual.

"Move, swine!" An SS guard pushed Chris, or tried to, but stumbled instead on empty air where the American had been. Chris ducked underneath the jangling, cumbersome uniform, between the Nazi's legs, and swatted the fellow's behind with the flat of his hand, sending him sprawling.

The other guard reached for him, but crumpled openmouthed as Chris bent his fingers back and snapped them. The third guard he lifted by the belt buckle and tossed into the bonfire, to bellow in sudden horror and pain.

Hysterical strength, of course. Chris realized, knowing what Loki had done to him. Four onrushing underpriests went down with snapped necks. No human could do these things without being used up, Chris knew distantly, but what did it matter? This was far more fun than he had expected to be having at this moment.

A golden flash out of the corner of his eye warned him . . . Chris whirled and ducked, catching Odin's spear with one sudden snatch.

"Coward," he whispered at the hot-faced "father of the gods." He flipped the heavy, gleaming weapon about and held it in two hands before him . . .

God help me . . .

. . . and with a cry he broke the legendary spear over his knee. The pieces fell to the sand.

Nobody moved. Even Thor's whirling hammer slowed and then dropped. In the sudden silence, Chris was distantly aware of the fact that his femur was shattered — along with most of the bones in his hands — leaving him perched precariously on one leg.

But Chris's only regret was that he could not emulate an aged Jew he had heard of from one of the concentration camp survivors. Standing in

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front of the grave he had been forced to dig for himself, the old man had not begged, or tried to reason with the SS, or slumped in despair. Instead, the prisoner had turned away from his murderers, dropped his pants, and said aloud in Yiddish as he bent over, *Kish mir im toches* . . .

"Kiss my ass," Chris told Thor as more guards finally ran up and grabbed his arms. As they dragged him to the altar, he kept his gaze on the red-bearded "god." The priests tied him down, but Chris met the Aes's gray eyes.

"I don't believe in you," he said.

Thor blinked, and the giant suddenly turned away.

Chris laughed out loud then, knowing that nothing in the world would suppress this story. It would spread. There would be no stopping it.

Loki, you bastard. You used me, and I suppose I should thank you. But rest assured, Loki, someday we'll get you, too.

He laughed. Chris watched the dismayed high priest fumble with the knife, and found it terrifically funny. A wide-eyed assistant jiggled and dropped his swastika banner. Chris roared.

Behind him he heard O'Leary's high-pitched giggle. Then another of the prisoners barked, and another. It was unstoppable.

Across the chilly Baltic an uncertain wind blew. And overhead a recent star sailed swiftly where the old ones merely drifted across the sky.

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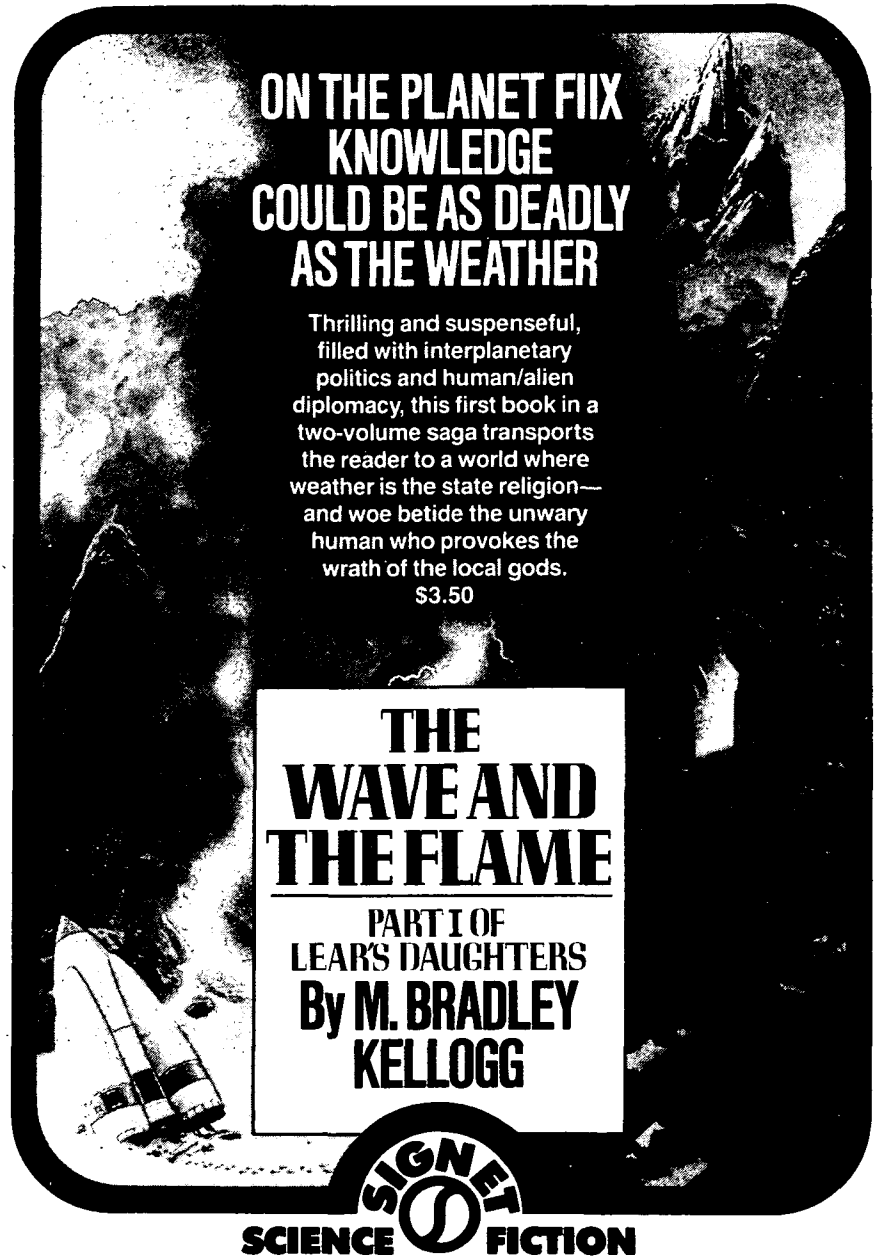
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Saraband of Lost Time, Richard Grant, Avon, $2.95

The Cross-Time Engineer, Leo Frankowski, Del Rey, $2.95

Uncollected Stars, Piers Anthony, Ed., with Barry Malzberg, Martin H. Greenberg, and Charles G. Waugh, Avon, $3.50

Nebula Awards 20, George Zebrowski, Ed., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, $8.95 trade paper, $17.95 trade boards

Let us discourse upon qualities:

We all know good writing when we read it. No problems arise until we attempt to define what we mean by good writing. Good *reading* needs no definition,* but good writing seems to come in many different sorts.

Let us look at some, beginning with Richard Grant's *Saraband of Lost Time,* which is in my opinion one of the most engaging first novels in years although it may on one level not be a good book.

To drop the other shoe first, the text leaves me with the feeling there are parts missing. This is a functional flaw. Specifically, I cannot fathom the pattern of the rather fragmented events taking place at the story's close. Hence, I'm not sure I know what the story is. But I certainly enjoyed it, and I do know that.

**We are, of course, aware of various bodies, from the federal to the local, that define "good" as being that which does not contain anything from any list of "bad." But we here are not concerned with negative good, since this is not an absurdist publication.*

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ISAAC ASIMOV'S

MAGICAL WORLDS OF FANTASY

6

MYTHICAL BEASTIES

EDITED BY ISAAC ASIMOV, MARTIN H. GREENBERG, CHARLES G. WAUGH
WITH HEADNOTES BY ISAAC ASIMOV

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Grant is the kind of writer Gene Wolfe is and Tom Reamy and Richard McKenna were. He writes kindly of the human creature, and he respectfully takes joy in the language with which he writes. There rises from his prose a quality that evokes warmth. He and the language move together with a finely wrought precision that evidences what we used to call a cultivated mind in the days before SAT scores. Thus his good opinion is worth having, and, having it, we are entitled to a bit of pride.

So this about *Saraband of Lost Time* is its paramount good; it is a piece of cultured prose which by its nature confers importance on its cast of characters and on their activities.

Now, then — are those activities in truth worth following? Yes, I think so, but obviously in some other works of prose we might have instances in which the goodness is only ostensible, and even here there are moments when, for me, culture was not quite enough.

The story is set in a far distant future when even a time of "madness" is far in the past. The madness left behind some machines that are still operable, but their operation is chancy. It also left behind the Ghoulmire, a swamp so heavily seeded with psychedelic warpoisons that even to this day every Spring is a nightmare. The Ghoulmire lies between a coastal plain and inland kingdoms which have never seen the sea and tend to think it a fable.

In our particular kingdom, there is an illiterate and capricious wight named Scaeigh (pronounced "sky") who is king, having knocked over the old king and himself having few prospects of permanence. Casting about for some solution, and nudged into it, somewhat, by a rather cleverer wight named Wode, Scaigh sets about making himself emperor by extending his holdings to the sea, in which he believes because he's too unsophisticated not to.

In attempting to do this, he runs afoul of the plans — if they are plans —of Lord Inbote, who may be a dotty old man buried in a huge crumbling library, and of the Warmaster, a nameless individual who appears to have no particular talent for strategy or tactics but never loses. Via such characters as Sergeant Brass, the crippled but far from helpless woman Wicca, and the wide-eyed Lieutenant Hadron, as well as a beastling named Guddle, the large plans of the prominent persons are misinterpreted, misdirected, or at least metamorphosed. This may or may not be good.

Add to this the family of Lord Erno, a provincial vassal who may or may not be in league with the (not very effective) guerillas in the lands bordering the Ghoulmire, and set it all in motion to shift from thence to the sea-bordering culture that proudly proclaims "our triumph is surrender," but does not seem to be entirely congruent with the talisman-carrying people. . . .

Somewhere in there, it all got to be too much for me. I followed Grant's excellent wordings and elegant indi-

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vidual scenes all the way, waiting to either be told where all the loose ends had gone or to get a fair shot at resolving them for myself. No go. It's possible I ought to have been able to cypher it all out. It is difficult to believe that someone who could draw Brass and Inbote, Lady Illandra, Wicca, Wode and Guddle, might not have rounded off his tale somewhere in at least the sub-text. But I think perhaps he has not; I think perhaps there are so many people, so many threads, that there simply isn't room for them even in 327 pages of close-set type. I think characters like young Thraus, and the Warmaster, and to large extents even Hadron and Alisha, appear and act as if each had many more scenes in which to establish the antecedents and consequences of what actions they perform on stage. I have no doubt those chapters exist, in some even better version of this book.

The Cross-Time Engineer is "Book One in the Adventures of Conrad Stargard," for once not the sort of sub-head to bring on a wave of dismay. I'm waiting for the next one, and if not with bated breath then certainly with a notable degree of optimism.

Leo Frankowski, in the sort of "About the Author" back-page note that is invariably written by the author, is described as a fortyish engineer-entrepreneur in Detroit, where he holds a number of patents, including one for an alloy metal useful in fixing rusty cars. His engineering company is mostly female, and he is active in the SCA (pronounced "The Society for Creative Anachronism," not "sky"), and Mensa, which is probably an eating club, since it is named after the Latin word for "table." His hobbies include reading, drinking, chess, kite-flying, dancing girls and cooking (told you so). A lifelong bachelor, he does not say what he does with the girls he dances.

Just the sort of fellow you hope doesn't move in next door. But before you get to that last page, you have gotten to Conrad Stargard, who is not Captain Future. He is a contemporary conservative rising Socialist young man with the Katowice Machinery Works, who slips, all unwarned, through a time-portal while vacationing in the Tatra mountains. Not altogether unlikeable, but somewhat wet behind the ears, he stumbles into Eastern Europe in the days of the Holy Roman Empire, which was not only neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire — as everyone, including Frankowski, automatically says upon hearing the name — but was up to its hips in fleas, cold mud and Medieval robber-barons. As far as ignorance goes, it was in over its head.

In this milieu irrevocably for all he knows, Conrad begins trying to make the best of things. He knows a lot about metallurgy and a little bit about a number of other technical fields, and he's constitutionally incapable of relaxing in the presence of incessant violence, extortion and stupidity.

So, bit by bit, like L. Sprague De-

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Camp's Martin Padway in the Gothic Rome of *Lest Darkness Fall,* Conrad begins making a crucial difference. He introduces not only a variety of technological advances but a species of thinking that will undoubtedly warp the world away from our timeline.

Since Conrad, unlike Padway, is operating in a universe that contains some sort of paratime patrol, he is probably due for rude shocks in future volumes, but in this one he remains blissfully unaware of that oncoming complication. He has enough on his hands as it is, what with Medieval politics, aspersions of witchcraft, and a quaint Polish institution I had not hitherto heard much of — lots and lots of nubile handmaidens. These are hospitably deployed by a friendly local noble to whose household Conrad becomes attached.

In that household, Conrad — now and then swept up in nostalgia for Socialist Poland and the crisp theories of Marxism — finds himself willy-nilly resorting to capitalist pragmatisms in getting things cleaned up and the millwheels turning. This is a task of some urgency inasmuch as in just nine years the Mongol invasion is scheduled to scour the vicinity. Although Conrad is making headway with converting a bellfoundry into a cannon factory, it's going to be a tight squeeze . . . speaking of handmaidens.

You may have noticed, in addition to the strong echoes of *Lest Darkness Fall* (and scores of lesser works), a tinge of H. Beam Piper's *Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen*. There is not much fundamental innovation in Frankowski's book.

But then, there doesn't really have to be. The otherwhen story has become generic within SF; what is required of its good examples is an educated and engaging series of proposed changes in a well-realized authentic background. What we expect — in addition to a salubrious dose of action-adventure or some other well-drawn thread of entertainment — is an intellectual *divertissement* in which we hold a species of converse with the author. He says: "Here is a model of reality, and here are the crucial changes I would make to get a desired result, X, such that the world will come out differently in some nontrivial way." We can then say a number of things, ranging from "I'll buy it" on through "Look here, I'd think you'll get Y instead of X" to "Bullsnoods!"

Sad to say, I do not know my Eastern European history of the period to an extent that would let me banter with Frankowski. Instead, I have to buy it whole, but he has done a good job; I find his reconstruction of the period to be quite sufficiently convincing, and the changes he then rings upon it — the social effect of Conrad's ponderous but elegant mills, for instance — are believable.

More than that, they are *likeable.* That's the key. Conrad has the quality of being likeable, warts and all, and the things that happen to him are interesting and, in some sense having to do

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with his likeability, deserved. We pull for him, and Frankowski does an excellent job of (A) evoking that sense in us and (B) meeting our expectations. I think he likes Conrad too.

Frankowski's prose is up to the standards of "Modern" science fiction — that is, John Campbell would readily have accepted him into the company of Heinlein, De Camp and Clement — which is to say that it is engineered to tell the story and stay out of its way. This is an admirable style for its purposes, but one of its concomitant characteristics is that it throws the burden of entertainment one hundred per cent on the story. Fortunately, it's a good one.

In *Uncollected Stars,* there are, by definition, few truly good stories. Nevertheless, it's a good book much worth having. Can such things be? Like so:

The premise stated on the cover is that what we have in this anthology, "Now Together For the First Time" are "Neglected SF Masterworks" edited and with an introduction by Piers Anthony with Barry Malzberg, Martin H. Greenberg & Charles G. Waugh. (That's a *lot* of people to spread over sixteen stories, but each part in its time is played by its man.)

The copyright dates here range from 1946 for Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore's "Time Enough," done under their Lewis Padgett pseudonym, through 1973 for Laurence M. Janifer's "An Agent in Place." The one is from the waning days of Campbell's "Modern" Golden Age in *Astounding,* and the other from Ben Bova's *Analog* in the formless 1970s. But one of the two heavy concentrations is on Post-Modernism, represented by six stories from the early 1950s, and the other is on what might be called Null-Wave writing — five stories from the late 1950s/early 1960s, not a one of them in any way informed by what was going on simultaneously in the New Wave fiction that has since become one of the major influences on contemporary SF.

The bylines are interesting: in addition to those named, they include Walter M. Miller, Jr., whom you will remember from your school course on *A Canticle for Liebowitz,* and Donald E. Westlake, whom you probably know — should know — as a broadly talented and vastly entertaining crime fiction writer under his own name for one and as Richard Stark for another. There is a late 1960s story from Richard McKenna, who was briefly an ornament to our field but was known at his premature death as the author of *The Sand Pebbles.* Then it's Alfred Coppel, James V. McConnell, Michael Shaara, Jerome Bixby, Pauline Ashwell, Henry Slesar, Jack Sharkey, Verge Foray and Ted White. (Shaara and Slesar are represented by two stories each.)

Coppel, Bixby and McConnell put

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one in mind of *Planet Stories,* which Bixby edited (very, very well) for a brief time, and where Coppell appeared frequently (for a brief time) and McConnell appeared with a 1954 story called "Grandma Perkins and The Space Pirates," which is not the story reprinted here but I'd bet is also uncollected. Shaara eventually won a Pulitzer Prize for his Civil War novel, *Killer Angels;* despite early promise in SF, and a fairly recent return with an interesting but uncommanding apocalyptic novel, he has earned his bread mostly as an academic, somewhat as McConnell is best known in the world as the editor/publisher of *The Wormrunners' Digest* and for his research into biochemical memory mechanisms. Ashwell, Sharkey and White have never come near earning a living as SF writers, for good cause — Ashwell has always had substantial other interests, White was editor of *Amazing Stories* during the nadir of its bricks-without-straw history,* and Sharkey, who like his brother, Tom, was a playright, freelanced prose and worked at odd editorial jobs only to support his chosen work.

I do not know who, before or since, has heard of the Verge Foray byline. Henry Slesar was amazingly prolific for a while in any medium, in or out of SF, that would have him, but after that outburst in the 1950s settled in to write day television, where he swiftly became a top hand and remained one.

What have we here, then — sixteen masterworks? No, not even if you understand that a "masterwork" is simply something done to demonstrate proficiency, and is thus by nature conventional. These stars found in a relatively narrow chronological trench tend to shine better in memory than they do in fact. They are variously interesting in spots, and they are generally entertaining, but almost every one of these people had done better SF elsewhere. And some of those had never done very good SF at all. The larger half of these stories comes from the top media of their time — *Galaxy* is the publication most prolifically represented, and the McKenna is from *F&SF* — but they were not lead stories, and one or two others here are outright salvage sales made on the strength of their bylines, not on the merits of their text. Even

**I do sincerely believe that if it weren't for White's ability to put up with the most typically marginal publisher any notable SF magazine has ever had, the miraculously unbroken span of* Amazing's *existence since 1926 would not have seen its fiftieth anniversary. White is not a fellow to take adversity with grace, but what we have here is an almost unique plain case of an individual knowingly sacrificing his own career in favor of devoting all his energies and considerable ingenuities to a cause. He knew that even some of his own community, and certainly all of the outside world, would regard this as an absurdity. He knew few would love him for how he did it. He did it anyway.*

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the best of us in the days of low pay tended to write a mediocre story before and after the story that made the best use of its idea; even the best of us sometimes tried to cram a novella plot into novelette wordage as the deadline came roaring down, and/or tried to write it for a market not natural to us — the Miller being a flagrant case in point.

Is there, despite all this, good reading here? Oh, yes — definitely. We are indebted to Anthony, *et al,* whose introductory notes are rarely stuffy, often directly informative, and sometimes fascinating; we are indebted to them for their varied labors here, which add up to an honest execution of a very good idea. Albeit the implication is that they have searched the length of SF's newsstand history, when in fact they have striped across the breadth of their teen-year reading.

Look at what you learn, directly and indirectly. You learn about an SF of otherwhen, in which Donald Westlake did not quit SF in disgust at how 1950s publishers treated the market, Walter M. Miller, Jr., did not burn out after *Liebowitz,* and Michael Shaara did not feel compelled to seek tenure and a steady paycheck. All by itself, that would have been a much different SF in the 1960s and 1970s — venture to say a markedly better one. Would that Jerry Bixby, that polymath, had settled on some one thing to do, hopefully the creation of more stories like "It's a *Good* Life," or even "Little Boy" as reprinted here. Would that. . . . Well, never mind.

Look what else: a survey strongly hinting at what it was really like in the days of mid-century American newsstand SF. These are the backpage stories that made what was known as a "solid issue" when supporting a strong lead novelette or serial installment. After all the anthologies that have skewed our picture of that time by reprinting the winners, here's one that wrenches it back toward reality.

As noted, this picture is not the one Anthony, Greenberg and Waugh first intended, though Malzberg's Afterword speaks of "a certain sympathy for losers." It is certainly not the one Avon wants you to have. But this book is for your permanent collection nevertheless. There is an old Bill Mauldin World War II cartoon of Willie and Joe, the dogface infantrymen, standing at last on the heights overlooking the Anzio beachhead. Abandoned Nazi cannon lie tumbled around them. Far away, back down the littered, tortuous road they have slogged up, is the beach, littered with broken landing craft and more pitiable debris. "My God," they say to each other, wide-eyed, "Here they wuz and there we wuz!"

Exactly. If nothing else, what we have in *Uncollected Stars* is a demonstration that the quality of truth emerges independent of intention,

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even good intentions.

What is the literary quality that wins awards? Damned if I know, and I have nominated works for awards and sat on award-conferring juries. I even administer — but do not nominate for or vote for — the Philip K. Dick Memorial Award for the best American paperback original of the year. [*Saraband of Lost Time* was on the short list of final nominees submitted by the jury. This is being written before they have voted the winner(s), but like you and everyone else except the usual gang of production miscreants at *F&SF,* they won't see it until well after Norwescon, where the announcement and presentation(s) are made.]

However that all may be, every year the members of the World Science Fiction Writers Convention vote on the Hugo awards, and the members of the Science Fiction Writers of America vote on the Nebula awards. The one is presumed to be a reader popularity poll, the other in effect the opinion of an extended jury of experts. Both include fantasy among their nominees, the competing World Fantasy Convention awards notwithstanding.

The Nebula winners for 1984 were William Gibson's novel, *Neuromancer,* (which also won the Dick and the Hugo), John Varley's novella "Press Enter■," Octavia E. Butler's novelette, "Bloodchild," and the short-story award went to Gardner Dozois for "Morning Child." With the exception of Gibson's novel, these stories appear in *Nebula Awards 20,* along with Lucius Shepard's "The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule," Gibson's "New Rose Hotel," Frederik Pohl's "The Greening of Bed-Stuy," Kim Stanley Robinson's "Lucky Strike," George Alec Effinger's "The Aliens Who Knew, I Mean, *Everything,*" Gene Wolfe's "A Cabin on The Coast," Michael Bishop's "Dogs' Lives," and George Zebrowski's "The Eichmann Variations." All these stories were heavily nominated; there is nothing questionable in Zebrowski's including his own piece.

In addition, there are survey essays on the SFWA, (by Norman Spinrad), on the year in films (by Bill Warren), and on SF in general in 1984 (by me). There are poems by Helen Ehrlich and Joe Haldemann, these being the winners of the 1983 Rhysling Awards for SF poetry, and there are other useful features.

So it's a good book; a must-buy for the serious collection-builder, and certainly a rewarding piece of reading for anyone.

Are these really the cream of a year's work in newsstand-borne speculative fiction? Very likely, though it is not perfectly clear that all the winners were better than any of the top nominees. Nor can anyone swear on pain of death that the best stories even made it onto the final ballot.

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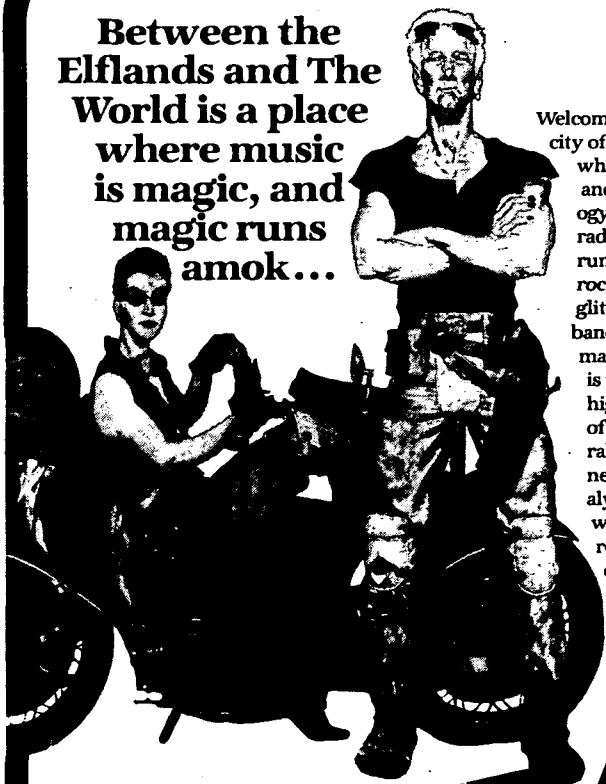

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Though they probably did, the nominating process is not infallible . . . as some bitterly point out from time to time.*

These are our best in this given stripe of time, and if one doubts it to some extent, one cannot doubt that they at least *represent* our particular sorts of bestness in that given stripe of time. An undeniable sense of quality arises from reading this or any other Nebula Awards anthology, with its varied ingenious and elegant attacks on the problem of being excellent. This is because they are in fact almost certainly attacks, instead, on the problem of doing the best possible job on the story, and letting being excellent take care of itself.

One cannot, I think, set out to produce a quality. One must have that quality, and if one does, then in any mode it can usually overcome even extreme degrees of error and of outside criticism. It has a thing within it, and we who perceive that thing, with whatever receptor and with whatever personal preference as to the details, are fortunate.

**No award is without findable flaws, and that includes the juried awards. In an introduction to a 1982 Avon book called* The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Vol. 3, *which is not in fact a direct successor to two prior collections of that name, Arthur D. Clarke dealt sapiently and definitively with that sort of objection. He found it trivial. I agree with him.*

ANSWER TO JUNE ACROSTIC

Arthur C. Clarke *Childhood's End*

In all that shadowy hemisphere, there was no single spark to drive back the night. Gone without a trace were the millions of kilowatts that once had been splashed carelessly towards the stars. He might have been looking down on Earth as it had been before the coming of man.

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Welcome to the age when the earth was flat and demons ruled the land

TANITH LEE

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Here is some not entirely serious advice from Mike Resnick, who is an SF novelist and also runs the second largest boarding and grooming kennel in America. His books include SANTIAGO: A MYTH OF THE FAR FUTURE and (upcoming from Tor Books) THE DARK LADY and STALKING THE UNICORN (not to be confused with this story).

Stalking the Unicorn with Gun and Camera

BY
MIKE RESNICK

When she got to within two hundred yards of the herd of Southern Savannah unicorns she had been tracking for four days, Rheela of the Seven Stars made her obeisance to Quatr Mane, God of the Hunt, then donned the Amulet of Kobassen, tested the breeze to make sure that she was still downwind of the herd, and began approaching them, camera in hand.

But Rheela of the Seven Stars had made one mistake — a mistake of *carelessness* — and thirty seconds later she was dead, brutally impaled upon the horn of a bull unicorn.

Hotack the Beastslayer cautiously made his way up the lower slopes of the Mountain of the Nameless One. He was a skilled tracker, a fearless hunter, and a crack shot. He picked out the trophy he wanted, got the beast within his sights, and hurled his killing club. It flew straight and true to its mark.

And yet, less than a minute later, Hotack, his left leg badly gored, was barely able to pull himself to safety in the branches of a nearby Rainbow Tree. He too, had made a mistake — a mistake of *ignorance.*

Bort the Pure had had a successful safari. He had taken three chimeras, a gorgon, and a beautifully matched pair of griffins. While his trolls were skinning the gorgon, he spotted a unicorn sporting a near-record horn, and, weapon in hand, he began pursuing it. The terrain gradually changed, and suddenly Bort found himself in shoulder-high kraken grass. Undaunted, he followed the trail into the dense vegetation.

But Bort the Pure, too, had made a mistake — a mistake of *foolishness.*

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His trolls found what very little remained of him some six hours later.

Carelessness, ignorance, foolishness — together they account for more deaths among unicorn hunters than all other factors combined.

Take our examples, for instance. All three hunters — Rheela, Hotack, and Bort — were experienced safari hands. They were used to extremes of temperature and terrain, they didn't object to finding insects in their ale or banshees in their tents, they knew they were going after deadly game and took all reasonable precautions before setting out.

And yet two of them died, and the third was badly maimed.

Let's examine their mistakes, and see what we can learn from them:

Rheena of the Seven Stars assimilated everything her personal wizard could tell her about unicorns, purchased the very finest photographic equipment, hired a native guide who had been on many unicorn hunts, and had a local witch doctor bless her Amulet of Kobassen. And yet, when the charge came, the amulet was of no use to her, for she had failed to properly identify the particular subspecies of unicorn before her — and, as I am continually pointing out during my lecture tours, the Amulet of Kobassen is potent only against the rare and almost-extinct Forest unicorn. Against the Southern Savannah unicorn, the *only* effective charm is the Talisman of Triconis. *Carelessness.*

Hotack the Beastslayer, on the other hand, disdained all forms of supernatural protection. To him, the essence of the hunt was to pit himself in physical combat against his chosen prey. His killing club, a beautifully wrought and finely balanced instrument of destruction, had brought down simurghs, humbabas, and even a dreaded wooly hydra. He elected to go for a head shot, and the club flew to within a millimeter of where he had aimed it. But he hadn't counted on the unicorn's phenomenal sense of smell, nor the speed with which these surly brutes can move. Alerted to Hotack's presence, the unicorn turned its head to seek out its predator — and the killing club bounced harmlessly off its horn. Had Hotack spoken to almost any old-time unicorn hunter, he would have realized that head shots are almost impossible, and would have gone for a crippling knee shot. *Ignorance.*

Bort the Pure was aware of the unique advantages accruing to a virgin who hunts the wild unicorn, and so had practiced sexual abstinence since he was old enough to know what the term meant. And yet he naively believed that because his virginity allowed him to approach the unicorn more easily than other hunters, the unicorn would somehow become placid and make no attempt to defend itself — and so he followed a vicious animal that was compelled

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to let him approach it, and entered a patch of high grass that allowed him no maneuvering room during the inevitable charge. *Foolishness.*

Every year hundreds of hopeful hunters go out in search of the unicorn, and every year all but a handful come back empty-handed — if they come back at all. And yet the unicorn *can* be safely stalked and successfully hunted, if only the stalkers and hunters will take the time to study their quarry.

When all is said and done, the unicorn is a relatively docile beast (except when enraged). It is a creature of habit, and once those habits have been learned by the hopeful photographer or trophy hunter, bringing home that picture or that horn is really no more dangerous than, say, slaying an Eight-Forked Dragon — and it's certainly easier than lassoing wild minotaurs, a sport that has become all the rage these days among the smart set on the Platinum Range.

However, before you can photograph or kill a unicorn, you have to find it — and by far the easiest way to make contact with a unicorn herd is to follow the families of smerps that track the great game migrations. The smerps, of course, have no natural enemies except for the rafsheen and the zumakin, and consequently will allow a human (or preternatural) being to approach them quite closely.

A word of warning about the smerp: with its long ears and cute, fuzzy body, it resembles nothing more than an oversized rabbit — but calling a smerp a rabbit doesn't make it one, and you would be ill-advised to underestimate the strength of these nasty little scavengers. Although they generally hunt in packs of from ten to twenty, I have more than once seen a single smerp, its aura flowing with savage strength, pull down a half-grown unicorn. Smerps are poor eating, their pelts are worth less because of the difficulty of curing and tanning the auras, and they make pretty unimpressive trophies unless you can come up with one possessing a truly magnificent set of ears — in fact, in many areas they're still classified as vermin — but the wise unicorn hunter can save himself a lot of time and effort by simply letting the smerps lead him to his prey.

With the onset of poaching, the legendary unicorn herds numbering upwards of a thousand members no longer exist, and you'll find that the typical herd today consists of from fifty to seventy-five individuals. The days when a photographer, safe and secure in a blind by a water hole, could preserve on film an endless stream of the brutes coming down to drink are gone forever — and it is absolutely shocking to contemplate the number of unicorns that have died simply so their horns could be sold on the black market. In fact, I find it appalling that anyone in this enlightened day and age still believes

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that a powdered unicorn horn can act as an aphrodisiac.

(Indeed, as any magus can tell you, you treat the unicorn horn with essence of grach and then boil it slowly in a solution of sphinx blood. Now *that's* an aphrodisiac!)

But I digress.

The unicorn, being a nondiscriminating browser that is equally content to feed upon grasses, leaves, fruits, and an occasional small fern tree, occurs in a wide variety of habitats, often in the company of grazers such as centaurs and the pegasus.

Once you have spotted the unicorn herd, it must be approached with great care and caution. The unicorn may have poor eyesight, and its sense of hearing may not be much better, but it has an excellent sense of smell and an absolutely awesome sense of *grimsch,* about which so much has been written that there is no point in my belaboring the subject yet again.

If you are on a camera safari, I would strongly advise against trying to get closer than one hundred yards to even a solitary beast — that sense of *grimsch* again — and most of the photographers I know swear by an 85-350mm automatic-focus zoom lens, providing, of course, that it has been blessed by a Warlock of the Third Order. If you haven't got the shots you want by sunset, my best advice is to pack it in for the day and return the next morning. Flash photography is possible, of course, but it does tend to attract golem and other even more bothersome nocturnal predators.

One final note to the camera buff: For reasons our alchemists have not yet determined, no unicorn has ever been photographed with normal emulsified film of any speed, so make absolutely sure that you use one of the more popular infrared brands. It would be a shame to spend weeks on safari, paying for your guide, cook, and trolls, only to come away with a series of photos of the forest that you thought was merely the background to your pictures.

As for hunting the brutes, the main thing to remember is that they are as close to you as you are to them. For this reason, while I don't disdain blood sacrifices, amulets, talismans, and blessings, all of which have their proper place, I for one always feel more confident with a .550 Nitro Express in my hands. A little extra stopping power can give a hunter quite a feeling of security.

You'll want a bull unicorn, of course; they tend to have more spectacular horns than cows — and by the time a bull's horn is long enough to be worth taking, he's probably too old to be in the herd's breeding program anyway.

The head shot, for reasons explained earlier, is never a wise option. And unless your wizard teaches you the Rune of Mamhotet, thus ena-

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bling you to approach close enough to pour salt on the beast's tail and thereby pin him to the spot where he's standing, I recommend the heart shot (either heart will do — and if you have a double-barreled gun, you might try to hit both of them, just to be on the safe side).

If you have the bad fortune to merely wound the beast, he'll immediately make off for the trees or the high grass, which puts you at an enormous disadvantage. Some hunters, faced with such a situation, merely stand back and allow the smerps to finish the job for them — after all, smerps rarely devour the horn unless they're completely famished — but this is hardly sporting. The decent, honorable hunter, well aware of the unwritten rules of blood sports, will go after the unicorn himself.

The trick, of course, is to meet him on fairly open terrain. Once the unicorn lowers his head to charge, he's virtually blind, and all you need do is dance nimbly out of his way and take another shot at him — or, if you are not in possession of the Rune of Mamhotet, this would be an ideal time to get out that salt and try to sprinkle some on his tail as he races by.

When the unicorn dictates the rules of the game, you've got a much more serious situation. He'll usually double back and lie in the tall grasses beside his spoor, waiting for you to pass by, and then attempt to gore you from behind.

It is at this time that the hunter must have all his wits about him. Probably the best sign to look for is the presence of Fire-Breathing Dragonflies. These noxious little insects frequently live in symbiosis with the unicorn, cleansing his ears of parasites, and their presence usually means that the unicorn isn't far off. Yet another sign that your prey is nearby will be the flocks of hungry harpies circling overhead, waiting to swoop down and feed upon the remains of your kill; and, of course, the surest sign of all is when you hear a grunt of rage and find yourself staring into the bloodshot, beady little eyes of a wounded bull unicorn from a distance of ten feet or less. It's moments like that that make you feel truly alive, especially when you suddenly realize that this isn't necessarily a permanent condition.

All right. Let us assume that your hunt is successful. What then?

Well, your trolls will skin the beast, of course, and take special care in removing and preserving the horn. If they've been properly trained, they'll also turn the pelt into a rug, the hooves into ashtrays, the teeth into a necklace, and tail into a flyswatter, and the scrotum into a tobacco pouch. My own feeling is that you should settle for nothing less, since it goes a long way toward showing the bleeding-heart preservationists that a unicorn can supply the hunter with a lot more than just a few minutes of pleasur-

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able sport and a horn.

And while I'm on the subject of what the unicorn can supply, let me strongly suggest that you would be missing a truly memorable experience if you were to come home from safari without having eaten unicorn meat at least once. There's nothing quite like unicorn cooked over an open campfire to top off a successful hunt. (And do remember to leave something out for the smerps, or they might well decide that hunter is every bit as tasty as unicorn.)

So get out those amulets and talismans, visit those wizards and warlocks, pack those cameras and weapons — and good hunting to you!

.....

Next Week: Outstaring the Medusa

"He's an eel, but I don't think he's electric."

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Barry Malzberg, whose recent novel, THE REMAKING OF SIGMUND FREUD, received a 1985 nebula nomination, returns with a mordant short tale about an urban dweller who just couldn't adapt. . .

Tap-dancing Down the Highways and Byways of Life, etc.

BY

BARRY N. MALZBERG

He came out of the hedges with an angrily uncertain expression, a hesitancy in his gestures. The gun, however, looked quite positive as he shoved it in my ribs. "Give me all your money," he said, "right now."

"This isn't very nurturing of you, Cecil," I said. "It also isn't legal."

"Don't give me 'nurturing,'" he said in a tortured whine. "Just give me the money."

Carefully I put my hand in my pocket, fumbled for my wallet. "You'll regret this, Cecil," I said. "I know your parents. They'll be ashamed of you—"

He reversed the gun and slammed me across the face with the butt. I do not mind saying that it hurt, but I took it with frozen expression, resolved not to show emotion. As he shifted the gun back to firing position, I could feel the blood crawling down a cheekbone. How humiliating, I thought. But of course, humiliation is part of the package here.

"Just shut up and hand it over now," he said. The gun shook in his hand. Overhead a helicopter prowled, rattling the sky. I could smell the gasoline fumes, leaching onto the pastoral, deserted suburban street. This civilization guards at all times against the illusion of beauty.

I opened the wallet and stroked the bills, took out the clumped hundreds. "Now," I said, "you should understand remorse—"

"Fool!" he said, snatching the wallet from my hand. "The whole thing!" He backed away two paces, clawed through it. "Three thousand dollars," he said at length. "You're holding out on me. Where's the rest of it?"

"I gave you all I had, Cecil—"

"You're a liar!" he said. His face

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clutched in petulance, he looked as if he were going to cry, a most embarrassing posture for a man of his age and history. "I want it all!" He seized me by the throat, squeezed. The impact made me groan, and I could feel a fresh wave of blood cascading. "Give it to me!" he said.

I struggled in my pocket, removed the ten hundreds I had folded away separately. "Here," I said, suffocating in his grasp, barely able to articulate. "As if it will do you any good." He released me, pushed me away, counted the money frantically. "There's *still* another hundred," he said. "You're holding out on me."

"That's all of it," I said. I stood shaking by the fence, the helicopter clattering overhead, feeling the pain now. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Cecil. A man of your background, your opportunities. Your parents will be horrified when I tell them—"

He looked at me with fury, and then, suddenly, centered the gun. "I told you to shut up!" he said. "You mention my name or my parents again, and I'll blow you away!"

"It's the truth, Cecil!" I said angrily, touched, felt the pain in my injured throat. "You're a disgrace to your heritage, and everyone should know about it. I'll tell—"

He fired the gun.

The bullet caught me squarely in the forehead, and I fell. His receding footsteps mingled with the sound overhead.

I lay near the tangled bushes for a good fifteen or twenty minutes this time. I must have been dead when they finally pulled me up with the ropes, took me inside, returned me to the all-purpose institute, and performed the standard procedures. At length, cleaned up and given fresh clothing — the cuts on the face were superficial, but they had to do painstaking work on a bruised larynx — I was hauled in front of them and roundly chastised. "I know," I said, hoping to forestall more of it after the initial onslaught. "I shouldn't have done it."

"You're a fool," the examiner said. "You did *everything* wrong. You were even worse than the first time."

"Sometimes I have to be given a little more time," I said — rather sullenly, I suppose. "I may not be the quickest learner, but once I know, I really know—"

"You mentioned his name, you invoked a personal relationship, you mentioned his *parents*. You held out on him, not once but twice. That's really stupid—"

"I got angry," I said.

"You *can't* get angry if you want to survive, you fool. How many times must you be told that?"

"I'll be better," I said. The cut still stung. I ran a finger over it lightly. "I don't want to go through much more of this."

"Then get it *right,*" the examiner said. "We have only so much time for each of you, you understand."

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"All right," I said. I knew that I should be submissive, cooperative, but a tiny core of revulsion still persisted. "These are our streets, you know. It was my neighborhood."

"You *cannot* get ideological. That is the last thing—"

"All right," I said. "I know," I sat there quietly, nodded with agreement to everything that was subsequently said to me, and at length they let me go. It was agreed to run the circumstance immediately: the best lessons are not assimilated to be reenacted in the morning.

As soon as he came from the hedges, I knew I was in trouble. His eyes looked desperate, and the gun was shaking in his hand — probably because this was his first robbery. "Oh my God," I said, "please don't shoot! I'll give you everything."

"Give me the money," he said. With the cap pulled over much of his head and with the huge gun, he was a menacing figure, if one could look past the facts that I knew all so well. I allowed the terror to fill me. "Here," I said, handing him my wallet. "Oh, here it is, just don't shoot me."

He clawed rapidly through the contents. "They told me you were carrying five thousand," he said. "Where is it?"

"It's all there," I said, "just count it again."

The clatter of the helicopter rattled the street; a shadow passed across us. I was careful not to look up, not to acknowledge the observation in any way.

He jammed the wallet into his pocket. "All right," he said, "turn around and start walking. Don't look back."

"Can't I just stay here?" I said. "You'll shoot me in the back—"

"Stop complaining! Just turn around and start walking."

"Oh Cecil," I said, "these cheap theatrics, these little scenarios of intimidation—"

He stared at me. "Don't use my name!" he said. "I *hate* my name!"

"Maybe if you stopped hating yourself, Cecil, you wouldn't do things like this—"

The gun began to waver in his hand. "Goddamn you!" he said. "Start walking. Get away."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," I said. "What your parents will say when I tell them—"

I never saw him aim and fire this time. But I do remember the impact of the stones as, most heavily, I went down.

They must have been furious this time. It was hours later before I found myself restored, and then they had left both bruises I had taken on the knees when I went down so rapidly. The examiner stared at me with loathing. "You'll never learn," he said, "you just never learn!"

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"I'm trying," I said. "He got me angry. The business of turning my back to him and walking, it was humiliating—"

"Don't tell me about humiliation!" the examiner yelled. He stood, only five and a half feet but intimidating on the podium, his mustaches flaring, his face diffused. "You people infuriate me. You don't understand, you'll never learn. But I'm going to *make* you learn because that's our responsibility here."

"All right," I said, "I'll say nothing. Whatever he says, I'll accept. Whatever he orders, I'll do." I felt a sudden twist of pain coming from my legs. "I'm sick of being killed and killed, pistol-whipped and beaten up, you know."

"Not sick enough," the examiner said firmly. "We're running out of chances, you know. One more failure and you're going to fail altogether, we'll have to send you back."

"No," I said. "No, I don't want that."

"Think of what your parents will say."

"All right," I said. I meant it, I could feel my own features flushing. "I'll shut up. I won't say anything."

"It's in your hands," the examiner said. He was breathing hard, almost as hard as Cecil when he fired the gun. "Ultimately *you* have to accept the responsibility, don't you see that?"

Stumbling down the street, I thought I did. I thought that I saw his point. His point was well taken, urban existence is impossible, one must learn at all costs how to survive. The sound of the observing helicopter, tracking me, made me ill; the fumes started me gagging. I was sick of it. The examiner was right: there was a time for student folly, but there was also a time to grow up. I had to grow up. He came from the hedges, extending the gun. "Give me all the money," he said. He was nervous and uncertain, but the gun was convincing. Enormously convincing. I knew what it could do now. I handed him the wallet, the money protruding from it. He snatched it from me, backed away, clawed through it in both hands. "All right," he said, "it's all there. Now lie down and close your eyes and count to 250. *Slow.* Don't move."

I pointed to the sidewalk. "Right here?"

"No dummy. In the goddamned *mud.* Over there."

I looked to the right, at the slimy substance, still drenched from the recent rain. "There?" I said. "It's dirty—"

He waved the gun at me, his control breaking. "Down!" he said. "Down, down, down in the mud!"

The helicopter's sound seemed to overwhelm us as it approached. We were completely in its shadow. Of course he never acknowledged its presence; he is programmed not to. *"Down!"* he screamed.

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I looked at the filth, at the gun, toward the invisible, implacable observing eyes in the copter. "Oh, the hell with it." I said. "Screw you, Cecil," I said. "I won't do it! I won't cooperate." I spat in his face. Even at distance, it landed solidly. He stared at me with fury, wiped at it, then raised the gun. *You fool,* I thought to myself. "Your parents will cry at your execution, Cecil!" I hurled at him.

He fired the gun. Flame from the muzzle, etcetera. Quite accustomed to the consequences by this time, I died quite neatly.

I wondered if they'd even bother to revive me this time. It seemed unlikely; I was hardly worth it to them. I'd never be able to live in their cities.

I just couldn't be a victim.

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JO CLAYTON

QUESTER'S ENDGAME

DAW
SCIENCE FICTION

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Mona Clee is a native Texan recently transplanted to California. In 1983 she attended the Clarion Writers Workshop — and met her husband there — and since has "sold seven stories to various markets, such as Terry Carr's Universe 15, *Pam Sargent and Ian Watson's* Afterlives, *and J.N. Williamson's* New Masters in Horror." *She writes that she is currently working on about a dozen short stories and a novel. "Dinosaurs" is a thought-provoking and exciting story of the penalties of not living up to one's dreams and ambitions.*

Dinosaurs

BY

MONA A. CLEE

"I ain't going to talk to you, lady, and that's that," said old Mr. Robertson. "You ain't my idea of a lawyer. I hired Bubba Preston to take care of this case for me, not some fool girl, and I ain't going to talk to anybody but him."

The quavering, petulant voice fell silent for a moment, and Camilla Searcy marshaled her fraying nerves for a reply. But the receiver clicked, and she heard the beginning buzz of a dial tone; he had hung up on her.

She replaced the phone in its cradle and put her head in her hands. She couldn't take any more tonight. It was already seven o'clock and she had to go home. She stood up from her desk, took her clutch bag and silk jacket, and started toward her office door.

"Hey there, little lady — you're not leaving early?"

Camilla started. Bubba Preston himself stood in the doorway, filling it completely, an apparation in felt cowboy hat, snakeskin cowboy boots, and the most expensive suit money could buy. In Austin, at any rate. He smiled at her, but she wasn't fooled, not after working for him for six years. There wasn't a trace of warmth in his piggish little eyes.

"It's just that I'm tired," she said to him. "I thought I'd start over tomorrow when I've had some rest."

Preston hooked his thumbs in his belt and shifted his bulk from one side of the door frame to the other. "Maybe you didn't understand me. I want those interrogatories on my desk first thing in the morning."

"Well, if I'm going to prepare them, you'll have to persuade Mr. Robertson to cooperate. He won't talk to me."

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"Oh yeah? And why is that?" Preston eyed her, his fleshy face suddenly expressionless. He was wearing a brass Texas Longhorns belt buckle that glinted in the light, hurting Camilla's eyes.

"He says he hired you to prosecute the case, and he won't talk to anybody but you."

The hint of a grin played about Preston's lips. "Well, use your womanly charms on him, honey. Or do you gals forget them when you go to law school? Like I always say, it don't do no good for girls to play at bein' lawyers if they can't talk to the ol' boys. I don't care how you do it, but I want those outlines on my desk tomorrow morning. I'll give you till noon, though."

Camilla flushed. There was a sudden movement behind Preston, and the sound of a meaty hand clapping him on the back. "Hey Dad," said a voice, "what are you hangin' around here for? It's late. Let's go suck down a cold brew." It was Butch, Preston's only son, a senior at the university.

Preston grinned at him. "You out of money again, boy?"

Butch grinned back at his father. Without another word to Camilla, Preston turned and strolled off down the plushly carpeted hall with Butch. "I've got a new joke for you," he said, his voice floating back to Camilla.

"Well, tell it, old man."

"What's got eighteen legs and two tits?"

"Jesus — you tell me."

"The Supreme Court."

The two of them screeched with laughter, their voices high-pitched and raucous. Hyenas, thought Camilla, they were just like hyenas. She sat down, her legs trembling, and waited until she was sure they were gone. Then she picked up the telephone.

As it rang, she could feel her stomach tie itself into painful knots; her hands grew damp and slippery, and she almost dropped the phone. On the sixth ring, Robertson himself picked it up.

"Hello," she said, with all the false sweetness she could muster, "this is Camilla again, over at Bubba's office. Listen, Mr. Robertson, Bubba asked me to tell you that he is personally handling your case — he wouldn't want you to think anything different. I'm just preparing the groundwork for him, and I just need you to help me with a few little questions, all right? Bubba's working late on your case, and this is just to help him out, so he can get into court all the quicker and win this case for you."

She felt nauseated. But it worked, as she knew it would. Soothed and flattered, the old man answered her questions, grudgingly at first, and then with more enthusiasm. At the end of ten minutes, when she had all the information she needed, it was all but impossible to get him off the phone.

When she was finally able to hang up, she pushed away from her the

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notes she had taken and stood up. She told herself she would come in at six the next morning to work on the outlines. Right now the only important thing was to leave.

She walked down the hall and passed through the expensively furnished reception room. Her heart was pounding, and her hands felt cold as ice. She would start looking for another job as soon as this case was over; she couldn't take this anymore.

But even as her mind cast about for a way to escape from the job, she knew it was useless. She couldn't move. Austin was still very much a small town, despite its recent growth, and there was nowhere she could go in the city without losing face and taking an enormous cut in pay — and reputation. The only sensible thing to do was hang on and pray she made partner next year. Then she wouldn't have to take quite so much abuse from Preston, even though he had founded the firm.

She rounded a corner into the foyer, where the elevator banks were located, and came to a standstill. There was no sign of Bubba Preston, but Butch was still there, and with him was another boy she recognized, his best friend, Clay. They hadn't seen her yet, and she almost fled back to her office to get a "forgotten" file.

But this was ridiculous. She, an attorney, skulking in the corridor to avoid a couple of teenaged frat rats. She walked forward briskly into the foyer.

"Goddamn elevators," Butch was saying, jabbing at the down button.

"Hello," said Camilla, with her best social smile.

Butch looked up. "Hey, associates aren't supposed to leave early."

Camilla forced another smile. "There's a beer at home with my name on it."

"All right!" said Clay. They both grinned. They looked like brothers, Camilla said to herself, with the same short, precise haircuts, the same laundry-starched, white cotton shirts, the same khaki pants and topsider shoes. With no socks.

Cookie-cut from the same mold, they both had broad, slablike faces, thick necks, and powerful bodies. Football players both.

"That's cool," said Clay. "There's a whole case down at the Posse West with my name on it."

"Oh, man," said Butch, "you don't even know what serious drinking is."

"So you do, huh?" Clay looked at Camilla. "Last time we went drinking, he ended up puking his guts out behind that hippie house next to the Posse. I had to take him home."

"How funny," murmured Camilla.

"Damn hippies stared at me the whole time — out of the window."

"How do you know, man?" asked Clay. "You couldn't even see straight."

"I saw 'em. Goddamn hippies, I hate 'em."

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Camilla felt herself grow annoyed. "Why?" she asked.

"'Cause they're dinosaurs, lady! Ain't you heard? It ain't 1968 anymore. They don't belong. Hell, I throw my beer on 'em every chance I get."

"Yeah," said Clay, "Butch wasted a whole Bud on one last week. We were in the Jeep, y'see, and this guy was just walking along, his hair blowing in the breeze, and Butch dumped the whole cup of brew on him."

"I hope he didn't get your license number," said Camilla.

Clay looked at her, and then at Butch, who shrugged. "Wouldn't matter," Clay said. "The cops all know Butch's dad."

The elevator arrived at last. Butch got in first. "You know the one I want to nail?" he asked. "I want to get that guy who goes around with the Coke bottle hangin' off his shoulder. You know — he always hangs out at that hippie store on the Drag."

"On Guadalupe?" Camilla asked. "Which one?"

"That health food store thing. C'mon, Camilla, you know what I'm talking about."

"Oh, that one." She gave him a strained smile. "I know where it is."

Clay winked at her. "Sure you do. I bet you go there all the time."

"I haven't been there since college," she said, growing flustered. "That's been years."

"I'll say," said Clay, and broke up with laughter. The elevator descended quickly then, as if making up for lost time. Camilla held her breath and waited for the ground floor so she could walk away from them.

"I bet you were one of those radicals back in the sixties. You're old enough." That was Butch, trying to get a rise out of her.

"That's none of your business," Camilla replied.

"No, you're just the type. I bet you're sorry for all those dinosaurs. I bet you give to the hippie relief fund."

The elevator came to a halt. There was an interminable pause as it leveled with the floor. Then the doors pulled open.

"If I thought about it," said Camilla as she stepped out, "I'd be sorrier for you."

Butch and Clay exchanged glances, as if delighted they'd finally managed to bait her. Butch mumbled something in reply that she couldn't catch, and Clay snickered. As she walked away she heard them begin to whisper, and then, just as she pushed through the door of the building toward the parking lot, she heard them laughing.

She drove too fast on the way home. She should never have allowed them to lead her on like that, she said to herself. Whatever Butch's father might be like personally, he had helped found the law firm, and she could not afford to alienate him or his son.

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Least of all over something trivial.

She pulled into the driveway of her house and just sat there, thinking, while the evening wind picked up and rustled the pecan tree leaves by the side of the road. Despite the hour, it was still light; but the sky was overcast, and Camilla suddenly remembered something about a winter cold front passing through.

She wondered what she should do. It would be so good to go upstairs to the little attic and paint. But —she hadn't picked up a brush in over a month, and right now she felt no particular inspiration. And the encounter with Butch had left her feeling angry and on edge, so that she couldn't compose her thoughts, let alone concentrate on painting. Maybe she needed a walk — a long, relaxing walk through the windy, darkening streets of Austin.

Treetops moved to and fro in the quickening wind. There was a scuttering sound as dead leaves jumped and swirled in the gutter. The first evening star had appeared in the east, but to the north there was a heavy line of black clouds, approaching rapidly. Suddenly it seemed like the most important thing in the world to be outside with the wind and the twilight, to walk for hours and hours and wash herself clean of all that had happened that day.

She got out of the car and ran up the stairs to her front porch. The old Victorian door stuck a little, no doubt because of the approaching cold front, and she had to put the weight of her body against it to get it open. Where could she walk to, she wondered as she went to the bedroom to change. It had to be someplace reasonably close, if she wanted to get any painting done afterward.

In a few moments she had stripped off her leather heels, the Dior stockings, the silk suit, the expensive slip, and all the tasteful gold jewelry that went with that part of her personality. In their place she put on jeans and a T-shirt. She turned to check herself in the bedroom mirror, still wondering where she should walk, when her reflection and the memory of Butch's taunts supplied the answer. She would go to that little grocery store on the Drag she hadn't been to for years, the one where Butch's hated hippies hung out. It couldn't be more than half a mile away.

Taking a washrag, she scrubbed off all her makeup. The professional with flawless face and black hair pulled back into a severe chignon vanished. In her place was a thin, dark woman whose face looked more haggard than she remembered.

Camilla shivered. She grabbed her wallet and ran down the front steps, slamming the door behind her. As she set off down the street, she turned once on impulse and looked back at her house.

She smiled to herself. No dinosaur that — more like a white elephant.

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But it was exactly what she had always wanted. She loved the house, from the ancient colored glass in the front door to the little attic room that let in plenty of light so she could paint — not that she had done much of that lately.

The house was her aerie, her one pleasure. And, she realized, her jailer. As long as she wanted to keep making payments on it, she could never tell Bubba Preston to go to hell.

The wind whipped about her with a burst of cold, and she breathed in air fast growing wintry. She quickened her pace. The cold front was noticeably nearer, but she guessed she could make it to the grocery and back before the storm broke.

The gray and blue skies filled her with an odd exhilaration as she walked. She had always loved Texas storms, and the cold, wintry days that seemed to have swept down from some English moor, not the heart of the American continent. She thought how odd such a feeling would seem to her colleagues at work; on reflection, she thought how odd everything she really loved would seem to them.

Depression swept over her. How had her life come to this? What was she doing, pretending and wearing a mask to work, just so she could continue to inhabit a world that made her miserable?

Ten years ago she had been young and full of ambition to be an artist. She had worn cutoffs and halter tops, lived barefoot in old houses with wooden floors worn smooth by decades of other bare feet. Those floors had been made to dance on. She had danced often then, for she had needed little money to live, and had cared nothing for what other people thought.

She frowned. Or had things really been different back then? In those long-ago days, there had been no one around to look down on her for being poor, carefree though she might be. All her friends had been poor, too.

As she walked, her depression deepened. She'd had a lot of talent, or so she'd been told. She'd even managed to sell a few paintings while still in college. But after that time she'd drifted. She'd tried first one program at the university, then another. Finally she'd gone to law school, which was the sensible thing for a bright woman to do. And now she was caught in the same trap that had everyone else.

A lot of ground had passed underfoot without her noticing, and when she raised her head, she could see not half a block away the brightly colored sign that belonged to the hippie grocery, and beyond it the busy traffic of Guadalupe Street, known as the Drag.

"The Whole Earth Hill Country Natural Foods Grocery," proclaimed the sign, and Camilla smiled faintly. It never failed to amuse her; it was one of her favorite sights in Austin. She

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had been away too long.

She would buy some fresh fruit there, she told herself, or perhaps almonds and cashew nuts roasted in tamari sauce. A jar of jalapeño jelly, made locally, would be fun, as would the counter half as long as her house filled with an infinite variety of cheeses. She would buy crisp crackers to go with the cheese and apple, and some brightly colored herb tea to make on the side. Maybe a hot caldron of the store's homemade soup would be brewing, minestrone if she was lucky. And lastly, as a reward for having gotten out and exercised, she would reward herself with one of those sybaritic, buttery croissants, filled with soft, warm chocolate — or perhaps a hunk of whole wheat gingerbread from the counterculture bakery.

Cheered by this prospect, she strode through the wooden doors of the grocery store and picked up a little straw shopping basket. Delicious smells assaulted her at once from every corner, and she looked about at the scuffed wooden floorboards and the faintly shabby interior with a distinct pleasure.

On the right, just as she remembered from earlier days, was the small in-store restaurant. It was nothing much, just a few tables and chairs, together with a sign — now fading itself from the years — proclaiming the area to be the Great Society Café. But Camilla could see that a pot of soup was indeed cooking there, and if her nose was to be believed, it was, incredibly, minestrone. She resolved to do her shopping at once and return for soup before beginning the walk back home.

As Camilla passed, she caught sight of a strange-looking woman sitting in the café. The woman had long, jet-black hair and pale skin, and she was looking straight at Camilla. Odd, very odd, thought Camilla, and then forgot all about it as she headed into the middle of the store.

The store seemed to have stood still in time. Soft-footed girls roamed the aisles, each with her requisite Indian print skirt, cotton T-shirt, and thick, sturdy, sensible sandals. The girls' hair was inevitably long, braided Earth Mother style, and not a one shaved her legs. Their male counterparts were shopping, too: soft-spoken men, aging, with long hair and full beards, blue jeans and dashikis. Many of them had children in tow. At the sight, Camilla felt a sudden sadness overtake her. Any one of these people could have been her ten years ago.

She drew a deep breath and told herself she was being sentimental. This sort of life was no good, no matter how quaint it looked. More than a few of the women with braids were on food stamps, and none of them had any money to speak of. What were they, anyway? Weavers, midwives, sellers of handmade crafts at the People's Renaissance Market at

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Christmas. No, this life wasn't the answer — any more than her own life was.

As if on cue, a figure appeared at the other end of the aisle and approached her. Camilla's eyes widened. It was Prairie, who had a real name, of course, but would answer only to her chosen one. Prairie, who, when pressed to give a surname, would answer "Flower."

Camilla had met Prairie one summer when she had tried to sell her paintings on the Drag. Prairie had been selling beeswax candles she made herself, candles that would not stand upright in a candle holder because Prairie left them to drip and would not make bases for them. Because of this Prairie sold few candles, but Camilla could not remember that ever bothering her.

Prairie's two children were with her, a boy and a girl named Sun and Wheat. Camilla noticed how thin they were, and wondered if they were getting enough to eat. Prairie herself didn't look well, which was a shock. Camilla remembered a much younger Prairie, pretty in an unkempt sort of way; Prairie had seemed free as the wind, the quintessential flower child, living gleefully in the present. Now she looked haggard.

They said hello. Sun and Wheat immediately set up a clamor for their mother's attention. Prairie, with a harassed look, seemed to forget what she was going to say to Camilla.

"Well . . . how are you doing these days?" asked Camilla.

"Oh — " said Prairie, trying to free her skirts from Sun and Wheat's demanding hands, "not real good. Haven't seen you for a long time."

Camilla nodded. "Last time, these two were babies."

Prairie gave one tenacious hand a hard slap. "Yeah," she said. Her voice drifted off into silence.

"So what's been going on?"

"Well — Seth and I aren't together anymore. He split."

There was a short silence. "I'm sorry," said Camilla. "Why?"

"Well, see, I'm a vegetarian now, and he's not into my thing."

"I don't get it. You always were a vegetarian, I thought."

"Oh, yeah, but I wasn't pure. I ate things like eggs and milk and cheese. They're just as bad as meat. They give you mucus, you know? Now I just eat nuts and fruit and grains and vegetables and I feel a lot better."

"The kids, too?" Camilla asked.

"Yeah, of course. That's why Seth split. He wanted to feed them impure foods, and I wouldn't let him . . ." Prairie's voice drifted off, and there was another silence.

"Are you still selling candles?"

"No," said Prairie. "I'm tired a lot — I don't know why. But I give lessons on nutrition to people. It doesn't cost me a lot to live these days . . . a friend's letting me live out back in her garage."

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Camilla nodded, but could think of nothing to say.

"I better go," said Prairie. Camilla did not try to stop her.

Camilla took another deep breath and proceeded down the aisle. It had really unnerved her to see Prairie. What really hurt was remembering how all the Bubba Prestons of the world had laughed at them in the sixties. Laughed at their dreams, their beliefs, their politics, their hopes—even at the way they lived. Camilla had always smarted under those jeers. Now Prairie was destroyed, and Bubba was helping run Austin. She could hardly bear it.

She was about to turn and just leave the store, when she caught sight of the woman in the café staring at her again. The woman had risen to her feet and was looking right at Camilla, as if startled. She looked even stranger now that Camilla had had a full view of her. She had on a floor-length black dress and a long silver chain, from which there was suspended a bright pendant of some sort, a costume unusual even in the Hill Country Grocery. Her face was pale, oval-shaped, and set off by two precisely arched black brows. It was crowned by a widow's peak at her forehead so perfect that Camilla thought she must pluck her hairline as well as her brows.

Camilla glared back at the woman, meeting her eyes. Then, deliberately, she turned her back on that side of the store and resumed her shopping.

Though much of the pleasure had gone out of the evening, Camilla plowed ahead resolutely, pausing at the bins of dried fruit to linger over the Calymyrna figs, Medjool dates, sugary dried apricots, and deep orange-colored slices of papaya. She passed over the bulk nuts and grains to forget herself in all the cheeses: Havarti, Port Salut, Boursin, Brie, raw-milk Cheddar, Cheshire, and Gloucester.

And chocolate cream cheese. She smiled, as if it had been put there just for her, and picked up a package. She would buy some crisp, thin wafers to go with it, and clear her palate with a sliced apple afterward. Then she would have a glass of wine — or several. Never mind the herb tea.

She hummed to herself. Already, Prairie and the strange, staring woman were forgotten.

"Sister!" cried a shrill voice, emanating from a body that had appeared, unseen and unheard, at her elbow.

Camilla cried out and dropped the cream cheese. Beside her stood one of the oddest-looking human beings she had ever seen. It was a man, with hair that reached to his waist, pulled back into a ponytail with an aging rubber band, and wire-rimmed glasses filled with lenses half the thickness of Camilla's thumb. He was short, skinny, and bore traces of long-past acne. As for clothing, he was arrayed in a multitude of ancient and colorful

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garments clearly culled from a majority of the city's recent garage sales.

"Give me five, sister!" he demanded.

Camilla blinked. "What?" she asked. Was he hitting her up for money? Here?

He put forth his right hand, palm raised toward her. "Give me a feeling, sister! Give me five!"

"Jesus Christ," Camilla whispered, and stared at him. Over his shoulder there hung a most curious contraption, suspended by fraying string. It was the lower half of a large plastic soft-drink bottle, nestled in a macramé holder knotted to the string. The bottle was filled with water, on top of which there floated a small plant of some kind. He had a large, tame lizard on his other shoulder, perhaps an iguana. Lastly he had flowers tucked over both ears, the bounty of neighborhood gardens.

Camilla realized she was looking at the "dinosaur" Butch had mentioned. A quick look into his eyes told her he was not quite right, and so she turned back to the cheeses, hoping that would be signal enough for him to go away and leave her alone.

But people like him never took a hint. "Won't you give me a feeling, sister?" he repeated. "Won't you give me five?"

Camilla knew without a doubt he was crazy. She also knew he meant no harm, that despite the double meanings anyone might read into his words, he meant them simply and straightforwardly. But she stepped back a pace. "Go away," she said, "go away and leave me alone."

He stepped back, too, the beginning of a mystified, hurt look on his face.

Camilla walked to the other end of the aisle, where she stood pretending to inspect the gaily colored packages of herb tea. In a short while she heard his voice again, imploring another sister to give him five. But this time he was not addressing her. This time he had cornered Prairie.

Camilla watched out of the corner of her eye. Sun and Wheat were looking up at the crazy man, smiling, as Prairie reached out her palm to touch the stranger's hand.

And in the background, by the checkout counters, watching all five of them like puppets on a stage, was the woman in black.

Camilla fled, past the wine, past plastic containers full of herbal shampoo, past costly small bottles of aloe extract and scented oils. She rounded a corner, grabbed a package of sour cream and green onion potato chips, and decided to go home.

Then she paused. She had last seen the staring woman at the checkout counters. If she tried to leave now, it would be impossible to avoid the woman and she had no intention of going home without her groceries at this point — not after all she'd been through. Perhaps the woman was

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about to leave; Camilla would wait her out. She made her way to the café in the corner and sat down at one of the tables, her back to the rest of the store. When a rangy youth with a short beard asked for her order, she discovered she had lost all appetite for the minestrone. Glumly, she ordered carrot juice and toyed with the glass.

She realized that her hands were cold, just like after the encounter with Bubba Preston. The realization made her angry, and against her will, tears welled up in her eyes. A feeling like homesickness swept over her, for a time long, long past. She remembered her very first day in Austin, a decade and a half ago, when she had been seventeen years old and beside herself with joy to be let loose in such a place. She had sat cross-legged on the scuffed hardwood floor of a friend's apartment, self-consciously smoking a cigarette, so happy to be grown up and away from home at last. That was when Austin had still been a new country to her, full of decaying old houses, the young, their music, and much beer. The time when Janis Joplin had lived just around the corner was not too long past; the summers when questioning and dreaming and building were a way of life were not yet over. And no one had ever thought they would be.

All that was gone now. All that was left of that time was a herd of aging, beaten-down people who had no place in the world. Butch and Clay were right — they were dinosaurs.

Camilla put her head in her hands. And what was she? At least she had a house, a job, and some security, for all that she might be miserable and never get to paint. There was nothing for it, then, but to return to Preston and the deposition outlines in the morning. The very early morning. She raised her head, finished the carrot juice, and gathered her thoughts together for the walk back home.

"May I sit with you a minute?" asked a voice behind her. Camilla turned her head, and saw the woman in black standing there.

She fumbled for words. She needed just the right ones to tell this woman to go to hell. But before she could reply, the woman said hurriedly, "You look so unhappy. You are in such turmoil, I could feel it no matter where I walked in this store. Can't we talk?" Without waiting for Camilla to reply, the woman sat down in the seat opposite her. "My name is Morwenna," she said, "Lady Morwenna. Maybe I can help."

Camilla just looked at the woman. Words failed her completely.

"Don't look so outraged," said Lady Morwenna. "I could sense your distress the moment you entered the store. It fairly battered at me, it was so strong. Yours is the most unquiet spirit here just now, and if I may say so, not entirely pleasant to be near. I don't mean to annoy you, but I

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couldn't ignore you if I wished to."

"Is everybody here out of their mind?" asked Camilla, clearly and distinctly. "Please go away."

"Am I so wrong, then? Tell me that you really are untroubled, and I will go." Lady Morwenna looked at her, right in the eye. After a moment Camilla lowered her gaze.

"You're right," she said, "but it's none of your business. I want to be left alone."

"But it is my business. All humankind is my business."

"Oh Jesus," muttered Camilla under her breath.

"I am the custodian of certain— powers. If I do not use them to help others, I waste the gift."

Camilla sighed. Clearly, the woman was into some cult. "Do you have a label?" she asked. "Or am I supposed to guess?"

"I am a witch," said Lady Morwenna.

Camilla put her head in her hands again. "Go away."

The woman looked at her with an air of great patience. "Tell me what is wrong. Every time I saw you encounter another person within these walls, your distress grew."

Camilla looked up. "Old memories," she said, the faintest touch of sarcasm in her voice, "or something you really ought to get off on. Ghosts."

"From your past?"

Camilla sat back in her chair and glared at Lady Morwenna. "Look, Glinda," she said, "get lost."

"You are quite skeptical. You think I am a kook," came the reply. "Well, let me ask you this: have you ever heard of Wicca? Do you know what it is?"

"No, and I don't much care."

Lady Morwenna ignored her. "Wicca is the oldest religion, and the most powerful. It uses the forces of nature, and of your own will, to influence the world. You yourself have a very strong will, and a very strong creative force in you — I can sense them. But your life has taken the wrong path, the creative force is dammed up, and your will is near the breaking point. You must have help to channel and control it, or it will do irreparable harm to you and to others. You are quite dangerous, my friend. You are like a time bomb. That is where I may be able to help."

This talk about herself made Camilla extremely uncomfortable. "Are you one of those people I've read about in magazines?" she countered. "Into Black Masses, cats, that sort of thing?"

"You mean the Satanists?" Lady Morwenna laughed. "Oh no — far from it. The Satanists are just foolish people obsessed with rebelling against the Christian church. They're nothing but a bunch of Christians gone wrong. No, Wicca is its own self, its own religion, and is far older than the Satanists or their precious Christians."

Camilla looked about the café with

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a casual air. "Do you normally do your recruiting here?"

At that, Lady Morwenna finally looked angry. "Frankly," she said, "I was sitting here minding my own business, enjoying some of that wonderful minestrone, when you and your turmoil walked in the door. You were about as easy to ignore as a loud rock band. What was I supposed to do — stand by like one of those people in New York and watch you hurt?"

"All right," said Camilla, "I believe you're sincere. But I also think you're a nut. Look here: I'm having some problems at work and in my personal life — that sort of thing. I used to paint a lot, but never get to do it any more. I'm locked into a world I don't like. But I don't see any practical way out of it. I can't go back to 1968 and start over. It's just that I was really happy back then, I thought it would last, and all these people in this store remind me of it. That's why I'm depressed. It'll pass."

Lady Morwenna's eyes opened wide. The woman had absolutely huge eyes, thought Camilla; the eyes made her nervous. "You must come to better terms with your conflict," said Lady Morwenna, "or someone will be hurt."

"Huh," said Camilla, "like a certain lawyer when I push him down an elevator shaft."

"You mustn't joke!" Lady Morwenna's tone was sharp. "You have a very powerful mind — a powerful psyche. You could be a witch if you so chose. That is why I was drawn to you. Haven't you ever had an experience to confirm this?"

Camilla shifted in her seat. "I was scared once," she admitted, "by a hyperactive Ouija board. But I don't believe in that stuff."

"You had better believe in it. You are like a powder keg, waiting for the right spark to set off a conflagration."

Involuntarily, Camilla shivered. She got to her feet and looked at the other woman. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I've got to check out of here and get home before the cold front blows through. And I've got to get up early and do a lot of work in the real world."

Lady Morwenna's face fell, and a look something like pity came into her eyes. Camilla made her way back to the checkout line, without looking back. She took her place and waited.

It was maddening how long the mellow clerk took to ring up everyone's purchases. Camilla fidgeted. Prairie and her children had disappeared into the night as if they had never existed, and the crazy little man with the lizard and the Coke bottle was drifting toward the door, about to leave.

Unaccountably, Camilla felt an urge to go warn him — to tell him to be careful. She frowned, trying to figure out what the root of the impulse could be. She decided it was the thought of him walking, alone and

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unprotected, along the Drag — the Drag, which was full of drunken frats in their cars.

But he left the store, and she put him out of her mind with some annoyance. Slowly, ever so slowly, the line inched forward. Camilla fumed, and asked herself indignantly how the store managed to stay in business.

At last the clerk rang up her own purchases. She paid and began to bag her own groceries.

"Yee-hah!"

Outside the store, someone bellowed, high-pitched and gleeful, as if a football game were being played right outside and Texas had scored a touchdown. The gooseflesh stood up on Camilla's arms. Then she heard a screeching and a squealing, as a car slammed on its brakes. There was a short pause, and then she heard the sound of two heavy car doors slamming.

And the sound of thunder. Camilla's heart sank; the cold front had arrived.

From outside the store came another bellow. Suddenly apprehensive, Camilla scooped up her groceries and hurried through the front door.

She came out of the store on the Guadalupe side and headed down the sidewalk. It was almost pitch-black, and the wind was blowing to beat hell. She had spent far, far longer inside than she had meant to.

Then she came to an abrupt halt. An enormous, shining Cutlass Supreme was parked crooked in front of her, managing to block part of the street, the sidewalk, and a goodly portion of the parking lot as well. A fraternity crest gleamed on the back window, silvery in the streetlight, and Camilla swore to herself she would call the police — for whatever good it would do.

She heard voices. Loud, drunken voices. She narrowed her eyes and peered around the building into the parking lot, and froze.

"Hey, man, have another beer," bawled a familiar voice. A moment later there was the sound of liquid splashing onto the asphalt.

"So whaddaya say?" cried another voice, the words slurred. Camilla felt her breath stop. The voices belonged to Butch and Clay.

"What've you got in that thing, anyway?"

Then a third voice, high and frightened, cried out. She heard the sound of liquid splashing a second time.

"Jesus, get that thing off his shoulder," ordered Butch.

The scene etched itself on Camilla's mind. Butch and Clay had her crazy little man from the store pinned between them, and had dumped his plant and water on the ground. As she watched, Butch grasped the lizard and threw it as hard as he could toward the street. There was a new sound of brakes squealing, and a bellowed curse. Then the car drove on.

The wind blew, and it was sud-

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denly very cold. Overhead the sky was dark, except for the yellow glow of the streetlights reflecting off the low, ugly clouds.

Camilla began to tremble with rage and disgust. "Why d'you go around with all this garbage, anyway?" she heard Butch ask.

"He won't answer," said Clay.

"I'll fix that. Grab his arms."

There was a short pause, and a scuffle. "Got him."

"Hey, jackass, say something."

There was still no reply. Butch muttered something she could not hear, and then there was the sound of a fist connecting with something solid. "You don't like that, huh? Hey — speak up, I'm talking to you!"

Camilla put down her groceries. She could hardly breathe for what was choking her. She felt turned to stone, afraid to make a move, to do anything. She realized she was a coward, and the knowledge sickened her.

But what could she do? If just one partner voted against her at the end of the year, she would not be made a partner at the firm, and she would be out. There would be nowhere for her to go in Austin but down. Her own life was on the line.

Butch pulled his fist back and punched again. Camilla flinched, as if he had struck her, too. And then some dam inside her broke. She was conscious of nothing except the enormous rage inside her, preparing to explode. She walked toward them.

Clay was the first to see her. "Oh my God," he cried, momentarily letting go of the little man, "Oh, goddamn it, Butch, look!"

Butch looked up. His mouth gaped open.

In the streetlight, Camilla could see the empty plastic bottle lying on the ground, the smashed plant, and the insubstantial figure standing beside it, his head bowed.

She clenched her fists over and over. "What would your father say?" she whispered. The rage did not diminish; to her own ears, she sounded like a schoolteacher.

Clay threw back his head and laughed. "His father? He'd say, 'good show, my man, roughing up the drag worm!'"

Camilla went cold, as if he had slapped her. "As cruel as you are, and you're not even ashamed," she said.

Butch just looked at her with contempt. He turned to Clay. "Do you believe you're hearing this?"

"Let him go," said Camilla. Her voice had begun to shake. "I'll call the police if you don't. I'll make sure he presses charges."

"Then I'll make sure my father kicks you out," said Butch.

"The hell with him. The hell with you." Once the words were out in the air, they echoed over and over, as if they had been an incantation. She felt her heart pounding in her chest, loud and painful.

Above them, lightning flashed.

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Scarcely an instant later the thunder roared. Camilla's hair stood on end from the electricity in the air, which seemed to flow through every shaft and follicle in her body. She took a step toward Butch and Clay; unaccountably, they let go of the little man and stood back.

He bent, picked up the plastic bottle, and scooped what was left of the plant into it. "Run," urged Camilla, but he did not. Slowly, silently, he turned and walked away from them down the sidewalk, disappearing into the night.

Camilla looked at Butch and Clay. Behind them, leaves danced in a sudden draft of wind.

Time stood still for Camilla. The air seemed charged with some brooding power, some magic. She felt the rage finally break loose within her.

"You dumb bitch," said Clay.

Butch moved toward the Cutlass. "Get out of my way," he said. It struck Camilla that he was afraid.

Camilla drew a deep breath. She spoke, without thought, as the fury possessed her — as if she were a conduit for something other, something far stronger and more merciless than she.

"You are monsters," she said softly, "so you ought to look like monsters."

Butch and Clay exchanged glances, their eyes suddenly nervous. Butch jammed his hands in his pockets. There was another flash of lightning, and another roar of thunder directly overhead.

At first nothing happened. Then Butch's face began to change.

It melted, it shifted shape, it rearranged itself into something liquid, horrible and evil. The bared teeth grew long and pointed, the eyes red and prominent. The skin roughened and fell into heavy folds across the forehead and brow ridge that were, as she watched, sinking and growing thick. Clay screamed. The thing that was Butch turned toward him with a bewildered motion. It looked down at its hands; then it screamed, too.

Even in the unnatural yellow light of the streetlamps, Camilla could see Clay turn pale as his own turn came. He clapped his hands to his face and clawed at it with his fingernails, trying to stop the change now overtaking him as well.

Butch stumbled to the Cutlass and jerked its side mirror upward. He bent and peered at his reflection. Confused, gutteral sounds issued from his mouth, and Camilla realized he was trying to speak. Then he clenched his misshapen hand into a fist, only to strike at the mirror over and over again in a futile effort to break it.

Now Camilla backed away from them. She put her hands to her ears to shut out the sound of their cries. She had to get away — the only important thing was to put blocks and blocks between herself and the monsters. There was no way she could

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ever be blamed for this; all she could do was flee.

"No," said a voice, "you must stay here."

Camilla whirled. The lightning flickered. The street was empty, except for a person standing in the shadows under the grocery awning.

"Morwenna," she said, "help me. What am I going to do?"

Morwenna advanced toward them slowly. She looked at Butch and Clay, who had huddled against the side of the car, whimpering. Her shoulders slumped; in the dimness she seemed very tired to Camilla.

"What happened?" Camilla demanded.

Morwenna looked up at her. "Don't you know?" she asked, her voice distant. "You cast a spell on them — some kind of spell."

Camilla's heart skipped a beat. "Oh God," she said, "can you undo it?"

Morwenna did not reply. "A Mirror Spell," she said, as if to herself, and took another step toward Butch and Clay, who pressed back against the door of the Cutlass.

"What's that?" When Morwenna still did not answer, Camilla fairly screamed the question at her.

"You turned their own cruelty back on them," said Morwenna, turning to face Camilla. "Just as if you were a mirror reflecting light."

"Can you fix it?"

"I'm not sure."

"But you're the witch!"

Morwenna sighed. "Yes, but I have steeped myself in the ways of white magic, and this magic is black."

Camilla gazed at the other woman, stunned. "It can't be. They're terrible, cruel people. They asked for it. I'll tell you what they did — "

Morwenna waved a hand to silence her. "It is revenge," she said, "and so the magic is black."

"Can't you do anything?"

The lightning cracked again, making Camilla jump. The witch's face turned toward her, and Morwenna said, "Perhaps. I can try."

"Hurry, before someone comes," whispered Camilla.

Morwenna approached the Cutlass where Butch and Clay crouched, their hands running ceaselessly over their own faces. They made guttural, weeping sounds as she approached. She looked down at them and said, her voice dispassionate, "Of course they are terrible and cruel. You could not have turned them into such swine otherwise. You were just a conduit when you worked the spell, Camilla — their evil was channeled through you and turned back upon its source. But it was not your place to visit this punishment upon them."

"I didn't do it on purpose!" hissed Camilla.

"That is why you are so dangerous." Morwenna stretched out her hands toward the two cringing forms and, very carefully, laid a palm against each sloping forehead.

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Both bodies jerked and relaxed, though the eyes did not close. "What are you doing?" asked Camilla.

"I am trying to draw out some of the evil — like poison from a snake bite. Then I will dispel it."

"How?"

"Meditation. Discipline. Now please be quiet."

Morwenna closed her eyes, as if concentrating. Moments ticked by, then minutes, but nothing happened.

"What's wrong?" asked Camilla.

"Your spell is very strong," replied Morwenna, and fell silent once more. As the seconds passed Camilla thought she saw a blurring and loosening of the horrible features before her; as even more time went by, she was sure. Like wax, the faces melted, only to reshape themselves under the force of Morwenna's will. With maddening slowness, they reformed into a semblance of their former shape.

Abruptly, Morwenna pulled back. "I can take no more," she said. In the dim yellow streetlight, her own face seemed to have altered. It had a yellow cast not entirely attributable to the vapor light overhead, and its texture had grown thick and spongy. It was lined and haggard, as if marked by long years of discontent and ill temper, and there was a hint of meanness in the eyes.

"Are you all right?" Camilla asked, distrustful, knowing she was not.

"I must go away and rid myself of this."

"What about them?" Camilla gestured to Butch and Clay. Each had risen to one knee; each looked dazed and frightened.

Morwenna gave a nasty laugh. "Watch."

"They look all right," said Camilla. As she and Morwenna stood by, the two boys got to their feet with the help of the Cutlass's rearview mirror. They stared at each other's faces and felt their own with hands that trembled visibly . They dusted themselves off, straightened their clothes, and cast fearful looks at the two women.

Butch straightened his shoulders. "We're seein' things, man," he said to Clay, and clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on, we're outta here."

He bent down to check his hair in the mirror. And then he screamed at the top of his voice. "Goddamn it, Clay, look! I ain't changed back!"

Clay shoved him aside and looked in the mirror. Then he, too, let out a howl that grated like nails on metal down Camilla's spine.

"They look just as they always did," remarked Morwenna, "to other people. But as long as they remain monsters — well, that is what they will see in the mirror."

Butch heard her, and whirled to face her. But Morwenna was smiling at him, a cruel, savoring smile, and he could not meet her eyes.

"Change," said Morwenna, and the thunder rolled overhead. "Change,

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and what you see in the mirror will be more to your liking."

Butch yanked open the passenger door and shoved Clay into the car. He raced around to the other side, threw himself into the driver's seat, and cranked the engine.

"Fair enough," said Morwenna, and smiled her nasty smile again.

They watched as the car crept onto Guadalupe Street and pulled away from the store. "What now?" ventured Camilla.

Morwenna turned big, dark eyes on her, eyes that were not at all kind. "You must go home," said Morwenna, her voice full of malice. "You must see to your own house — tend your own garden. This must never happen again."

"I will," said Camilla. "I will."

"You had better," Morwenna said archly. She raised her eyebrows and looked at Camilla, as if savoring a private joke.

"Why do you say it like that?"

The witch smiled. "Perhaps I've cast a spell on myself. Why should you walk away from this unscathed? You haven't looked in a mirror yet, my dear."

Camilla's hands flew to her face. It felt normal, but somehow she knew that was no guarantee. "What have you done to me?"

Morwenna threw back her head and gave a long, screeching, jeering laugh. "Put your own house in order, love, and perhaps nothing! Be true to yourself, and you will see nothing to fear in the mirror! But keep on the way you are going, and I cannot promise what you see will be pretty."

"Go away," said Camilla. "Get rid of the stuff that's in you now. Go on!"

Morwenna laughed again, swirled her black dress around her, and strode off down the sidewalk without a backward glance.

Overhead there was another clap of thunder; then the downpour began. Camilla picked up her groceries in a frenzy and began to run, weighed down and awkward, through the dark night and whipping rain toward home. As she ran, she made resolution after furious resolution. She would quit the firm the next day. She would find another job, another city, perhaps even another state. She would not throw in her lot with the Bubba Prestons of the world, nor delude herself that she could live out the daytime in their reality, and the nighttime in her attic aerie full of colors and canvas. At present her very spirit was split and locked in combat with itself; she would end that warfare, and be whole once more. Yet she would not pick up the path her poor dinosaurs had taken and become like Prairie. She would find a new path, unique to her, an untried middle ground.

Cold arctic air swirled around her, and raindrops beat at her like so many bits of sleet. Her heart hammered, and she felt herself break out in sweat in spite of the numbing cold.

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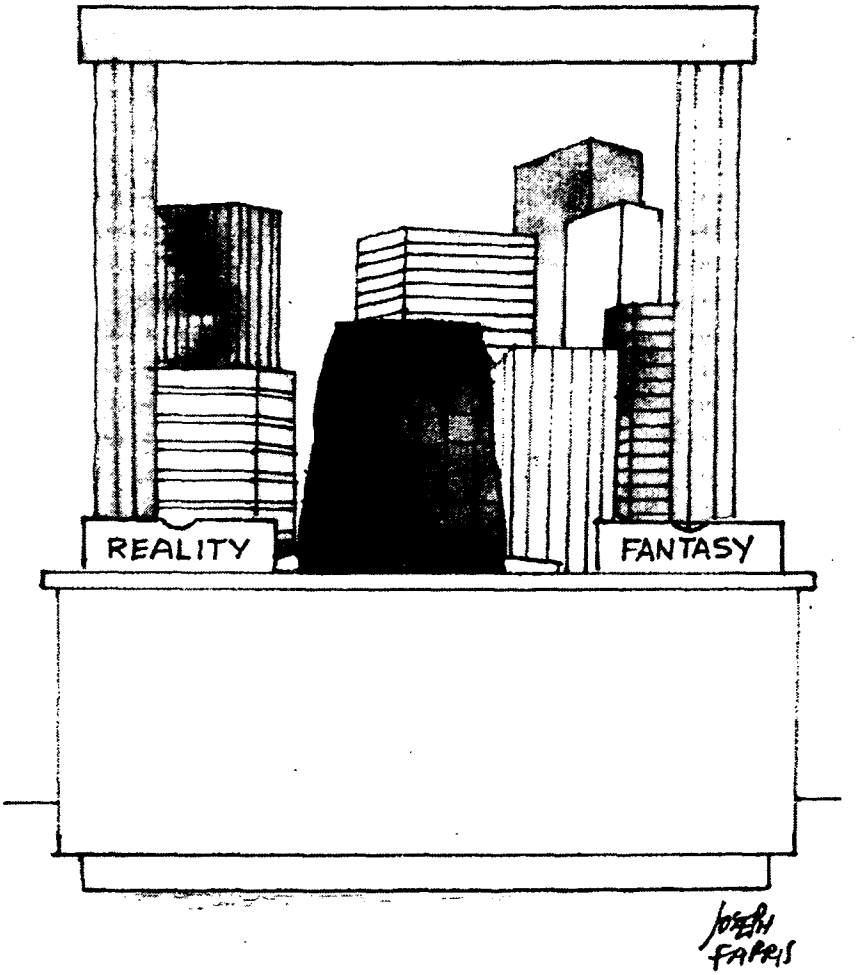
She would do all these things, true. She would do them as fast as she possibly could. But would it be in time? Could she put her own house in order?

Her lungs hurt with every breath, but she did not slow her pace. She pushed on through the dark toward her home, her nest, her paints, and her waiting mirror.



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Installment 17: *In Which We Unflinchingly Look A Gift Horse In The Choppers*

One of my pet hates is Christmas cards. No need to go into the convoluted thinking behind my hatred of the damned things; I'm a month or so shy of age fifty-two, and I'm permitted a few eccentricities. Suffice to say that every year, despite many and widely-disseminated appeals to save their money and send what they'd spend on a card to some noble charity, readers and even long-time friends who should know better, fill my already spavined mailbox with gold lamé, embossed, outsized, Oriental silk-screened wishes for a joyous Christmas, Channukah, New Year, Twelfth-night, Hsin Nien, Festival of Tet, Druidmass and End of Days (the last accompanied by a pair of ducats on the 50-yard line for the battle between Gog and Magog).

Most of these are returned to the sender on the same day they are received, with the message I HATE XMAS CARDS AND CATS printed with a large, thick-line green marker, right there on the envelope. I've been doing this for years. But as we know, there are always those who Don't Get The Message. So every year I curse and fume and send back hundreds of Yuletide missives.

You cannot know the enmity this act generates.

Even those faithful who stick with

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me during my most indefensible, unconscionable periods of social vileness and irrational gaucherie, sprout fangs and fire back letters (in ordinary envelopes, not those square Xmas card wrappings) in which such umbrage, such animosity, such a tone of affront is manifested, that one might think I had used the family budgie for genetic experiments. The thrust of their anger is that I have committed a felony. Let me opine that Heinlein's latest novel isn't up to his best, or that Reagan is so locked into Cold War thinking that he would sacrifice us all to his paranoia, or that *Peanuts* is a dumb comic strip, and they'll all smile protectively and make excuses for me . . . he's such a sweet man, perhaps he was just having a rotten day.

But let them receive the card they sent, all in good faith and sincerity and camaraderie, scrawled upon in green marker, and they howl for a return of the ducking stool. Defenestration is too good for me, they shriek! Scaphism is too kind a fate, they bellow!

How *dare* I not only turn away this kindly-intended, innocent gesture of goodwill, but let them know I never asked for it in the first place? This is an act of antisocial intercourse guaranteed to sour even the sweetest friendship.

And in what obscure fashion does any of this have to do with YOUNG SHERLOCK HOLMES (Paramount)?

Well, let me put it this way:

It had to've been late in 1942. I was eight years old. I was laid up with the flu. We're talking Painesville, Ohio. And my mother was going downtown to do some shopping, and I was miserably bundled in my bed with more books than I could've read if I'd been down with something serious like rinderpest or beriberi or Dutch Elm blight, and my radio so I could listen to *Jack Armstrong* and *Superman* and *Terry and the Pirates*, and of course my comic books; but I still lacked the one thing short of chicken soup with farfel that could save me from death. And that, simply put, was issue number 18 of *Captain Marvel Adventures*, a 10¢ panacea issued every four weeks by the world-famous faith healers, Fawcett Comics.

With great care I explained to my mother that issue #18 had been among the publications received just that very day at the magazine-and-smoke-shop right next to the Utopia Theater (at which venue, I hoped she would notice, I was *not* enjoying the Saturday ritual of seeing Wild Bill Elliott as Red Ryder or Sunset Carson as Sunset Carson mopping up bad guys, to the accompaniment of the crunching of popcorn and the smell of gunsmoke, which personal tragedy surely entitled me to *some* consideration) (if not the Croix de Guerre). I described in detail how the magazines came in all bundled together with wire that had to be snipped by the nice man with

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the smelly panatella who ran the shop, and that if she had *any* faint shadow of affection for one soon to pass through the veil, she would make sure that the copy of issue #18 of *Captain Marvel Adventures* she selected from the racks was not one that had been scored by the dreaded bundle wire.

I went over the instructions several times. You know how parents can be. And I made absolutely certain she knew it was issue #18, the brand-new one available today for just a few minutes before other, lesser, children (who were not on their deathbeds) savaged the supply. Eighteen, I said again. One eight. I have all the issues up to number eighteen, I said, to her retreating form. Eighteen, I shouted from my bedroom window as she got into the car. Eighteen, I gasped, falling back amid the sodden sheets.

Don't you know I waited *all damned day* for that comic!

Now this part is painful. Not just because of what comes next in the story, but because of my behavior. I have never forgotten what comes next, and if I'd had the courage to say it to her before she died about ten years ago, I'd have told my mother that I spent the next thirty-odd years of my life being ashamed of my behavior. But I was so ashamed that even at age forty-something, I couldn't dredge up that awful moment and ask for absolution.

Because what happened was that my mother came home all laden down with groceries, having spend a difficult day helping my dad in the store and having rushed back to make dinner, and when she answered my endless screams from upstairs, demanding my *Captain Marvel Adventures*, and she handed me the paper bag with the comic in it, the comic she had gone out of her way to buy for me, and I pulled it out of the bag and saw that it was issue number seventeen (*#17* for crine out loud, not #18 which I had waited for all day with my tongue hanging out, only the thought of that comic keeping the Man With the Scythe from my person, but sevenbloodyteen!!!), the one with Captain Marvel battling Jap Zeros on the cover, I screamed at my mother and threw the damned comic across the room.

I'm certain that when I really do lie on my death bed, the look on my mother's face at that moment will sneak back to strangle my spirit. The real crimes we commit cannot, somehow, ever be expunged. We pay and pay, right up to the last moment. There simply isn't enough in the exchequer to settle the debt.

And the terrible part of all this is that I *know* if the same circumstance were set up today, and my mother, or my best friend, or Susan, or Mother Teresa, or God his/her/its self brought me the wrong issue of *Captain Marvel Adventures*, I'd act exactly the same, indefensible, selfish way.

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Which brings me to *Young Sherlock Holmes*.

Consider: how many times have good Samaritans "done you a favor" you didn't ask for? How many times have you wished they had kept their kindness to themselves, not put you in a position where you had to smile grimly and say, "That was very thoughtful of you," when what you wanted to do was knock them silly for putting you in a position where you had to clean up the mess engendered by "the thoughtful act of selflessness"?

People are forever doing things for your own good. They are forever giving you gifts *they* want you to have which you don't, frequently, want any part of. They merely want to serve. They want to share. They want you to have a nice, expensive Christmas card with the word Hallmark on the back so you'll know they cared enough to send the very best.

My wretched nature and guilt aside, I suggest this is self-serving on the part of the giver, with no damned concern for the attitude of the recipient.

Everyone gets a fix from "good deeds." I applaud that. I far more trust those who will cop to the truth that they feel terrific when they perform a noble act, than those who try to get us to believe they were solely motivated by a desire to serve the commonweal. Good Samaritans and philanthropists and those who roll bandages at the local hospital are not much different, at core, it seems to me, than those who attempt to legislate morality, to save us from the devil, or to convince us that we need to believe as they do to preserve the Union. It is a philosophical and ethical membrane that separates us from them.

But I suppose it's part of human nature to give the gift that not coincidentally pushes the giver's viewpoint. Whether as bread-and-butter house gift or as guilt-assuaging invitation to dinner as reciprocation for all the dinners they've given *you*, the seemingly selfless act is, I submit, rooted as deeply in the need of the giver to get his or her fix, as it is to reward the recipient.

The thorn in the paw when one accepts the gift, however, is that seldom are we asked if we want this attention.

When it comes to filmic *hommage* — one of those gifts never sought and usually damaged in transit — the custom of primacy of interest by the creator is more honor'd in the breach than the observance.

Did the Salkinds check with Siegel or Schuster as to their enthusiasm for having their creation Superman transmogrified into a clown at the hands of David and Leslie Newman? If we listen closely can we hear Edgar Rice Burroughs thrashing in his grave at what befell Tarzan under the tender ministrations of Bo and John Derek,

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Hugh Hudson, or the blissfully-forgotten hacks who churned out half a dozen Me-Retard-You-Maureen-O'Sullivan idiocies? Was any attempt made by concerned parties, to hire a spiritualist who might pierce the veil and get Val Lewton's reaction to writer-director Paul Schrader's quote in the May-June 1982 issue of *Cinefantastique*, just prior to release of Schrader's remake of the 1942 Lewton-produced *Cat People*, that "Val Lewton's *Cat People* isn't that brilliant. It's a very good B-movie with one or two brilliant sequences. I mean, we're not talking about a real classic"? With how much good grace do you think Ian Fleming would take the jaded, imbecile shenanigans of the James Bond we see in *Octopussy* or *A View to a Kill*?

Even on suicide missions, at least lip service is paid to volunteerism. But Captain Nemo, Sheena, King Kong, Conan and Norman Bates keep getting sent out there to suck up them bullets — a kinder fate than having to suffer the critics' wrath — without any of the "gift-givers" bothering to ask if they mind having their literary personas savaged.

Hommage is usually less a sincere form of flattery than an expensive Xmas card that blows up in your face. In the case of Brian De Palma, of course, *hommage* is merely a license to steal from Hitchcock.

As the unsought gift is tendered, one has the urge to snarl, "Who asked for it, creep?" Nowhere do we find evidence that the recipient has been granted the option of saying, "Thanks but no thanks."

Which brings us, yet again, to *Young Sherlock Holmes*, 109 minutes of just simply awful, lamebrained and inept crapola from the team that brought you *Gremlins*. One hundred and nine minutes of unsolicited *hommage* that utterly corrupts the nobility and artistic value of the original creation; proffered with disingenuous and actively embarrassed apologia front-and-back by young scrivener Chris Columbus and his mentor, the evermore-millstonelike Steven Spielberg, who managed — one presumes with dangled carrots of fame and pelf and posterity — to suck in yet another excellent filmmaker, director Barry Levinson, whom we heretofore revered for *Diner* and the cinema adaptation of Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*.

(An aside. No one is more aware of the seemingly incessant flow of aristarchian eloquence I've expended on Spielberg-influenced films, beginning with *Gremlins*, than I. From that first Chris Columbus-scripted abomination, through *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, to *Goonies, Explorers* and *Back to the Future*, there has been no peace for Spielberg and those who have realized his personal view of movies by the warping of their own vision, from this corner of the critical universe. It has become such a threnody that even I grow weary of

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the dirge. Yet what is one to do? All I have to work with is what I see on the big screen. And Spielbergian product has so dominated the industry since *E.T.* in 1982 — an industry that imitates what it takes to be success to the exclusion of alternate styles of flimmaking — that almost every other trend is as a trickling crick to the Mississippi. As verification of that assertion, if common sense and simple observation fail to convince, consider: taken as a whole, the five films nominated as best of the year for the Oscars earned 220 million in boxoffice revenues; ***Back to the Future***, which was not among those five, earned 200 million. In the face of such success at a strictly commercial level, the level at which the drones and hacks of the industry place value worth emulating, a level of success that is awesome not only because of its height above the mass of financially-remunerative films, but because of the dismaying lack of quality and paucity of content they champion for those whose aspirations are already operating on a subterranean level, how can an observer trying to make sense of it all *not* dwell to almost pathological degree on what Spielberg hath wrought? It is the Spielberg sensibility that informs the writing of scenarists whose work prior to their association with him seems, in my view, stronger and truer and less marred by cutesy trivialism. It is the Spielberg sensibility that poisons the directorial attack of Robert Zemeckis and Kevin Reynolds and Joe Dante and now Barry Levinson. It is the juggernaut that flattens studio considerations of development of projects outside the narrow path of what Spielberg has shown will appeal to the adolescent — or at best sophomoric — demographic wedge that buys tickets. So what is one to do? Either to pretend that ***Out of Africa*** or ***Kiss of the Spider Woman*** are more than noble exceptions to a rule of picayune endeavor, or to continue dealing with that which dominates the industry in hopes that someone, somewhere, will take note and break loose from the Accepted Wisdom that the only surefire way to make a buck in movies is to ape the three or four styles of motion pictures that have been raking in the gelt: knife-kill flicks, ***Rambo/Rocky*** manipulations, high school epics of tits and food fights, or Spielbergian reductions of life and adventure to the importance of cartoons. I share your exhaustion at these fulminations . . . But what is one to do?)

It is painful to attack a writer as young in years and in time spent working at his craft as Chris Columbus, yet what are we to make of someone whose credits to date include ***Reckless, Gremlins, Goonies*** and the quisquilian subject under examination here?

Another Spielberg "discovery," Columbus seems sincere, dedicated, and hardworking. I spoke to him via

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telecon once, soon after *Gremlins*. My natural instinct was to give him the benefit of the doubt on that one; to assume (erroneously, it turns out) that the vileness of *Gremlins* emerged as corruptions of his original intent by Spielberg and/or director Joe Dante.

Turns out that both Dante and Columbus were swayed to the Spielberg view of filmmaking by the amentia of Amblin Entertainment; and we now have a quartet of Columbus screenplays to evaluate; and much as we might like to believe that Columbus is the new Lawrence Kasdan, even his staunchest supporters now admit in private what they will not say in public: Chris Columbus just ain't very good at this thing called screenwriting.

And that wearying aspect of Spielberg-influenced films that masquerades under the encomium *bommage*, that endless truckling to injokes and references to best-forgotten minor films of a generation's childhood, takes center stage with *Young Sherlock Holmes*. Sorrowful head-shaking ensues.

There is nothing in this film fresh or innovative or even particularly well-executed beyond the delicious conceit of showing us what Holmes and Watson were like as students. A mind-tickler that has intrigued Sherlockians who can never get enough of the adventures of the World's First Consulting Detective contained in the sixty (or, as some savants insist, seventy-two) elements of the canon. Doyle forever possesses our admiration and affection not only because of what he let us know about Sherlock Holmes through the recountings of his escapades via Dr. John H. Watson, but because of what he *didn't* let us know. The tantalizing hints of cases not recorded — yes, lord, let us one day find hidden under a false bottom in that travel-worn and battered tin dispatch box kept safe in the vaults of the bank of Cox and Company, at Charing Cross, the full story of the horrible Giant Rat of Sumatra — and the clues to Holmes's background. We can surmise with some certainty that he was born in Surrey, and we know (because Holmes said it was so) that he was the descendant of country squires, but was Mycroft his only sibling? And why, exactly, had Holmes such suspicion of women?

The gaps in our knowledge are almost as engaging as the vast amount we know, the adventures we read over and over from our first thrilling exposure to the canon till that final rereading of "The Adventure of the Retired Colourman" moments before we go to meet Sir Arthur in person on the other side.

So the pull of *what were Holmes and Watson like as prep school lads?* is a kind of what-if I think no dealer in imagination could resist. I cannot find it in my heart to fault Columbus or Spielberg or Levinson for giving in to the temptation to fiddle with the

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conceit. It is the shallow and tawdry manner of their dealing with this material that hardens my heart. The word "entertainment" as it has come to be debased — as per Amblin "Entertainment" — falls far short of entertainment as we know it in its highest form, that is, as literature. Which is what the Doyle Sherlockian *oeuvre* has demonstrated itself to be.

Columbus, *et al*, have treated Holmes as entertainment in this debased context, denying the material's value not only as Literature but, worse, more offensively, as Entertainment in the greater sense. But then, one suspects these people can do no better. Which, if true, is sad enough; yet one might wish that this batch of mediocre ribbon clerks could get past its awesome arrogance, its insular belief in the myth of its own omniscience, to display an uncharacteristic reticence when it comes to laying ham hands on the work of its betters. If the best they can conjure are the screenplay equivalents of fast foods and tv dinners, then swell. In the words of Thomas Carlyle, "Produce! Produce! Were it but the pitifullest infinitesimal fraction of a Product, produce it, in God's name! 'Tis the utmost thou hast in thee: out with it, then. Up, up! Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might." But let them, also in God's name, even if the name be Doyle (but not if the name be Spielberg), have the humility to know that their best is, at best, ephemeral fluff, examples

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of planned obsolescence, junk that insults the honorable term *junk*, creativity at the level of dispensability where one finds Kleenex and Saran-Wrap. Let them have the common sense to pull back from the posturing foolishness of a Schrader downgrading a Lewton in order to seem less a thief of art. Let them cease trying to fool us that their misappropriations are sincerely motivated *bommage*.

I have more to say on this. It may be that some primal force other than my mere anger has been inflamed through the act of codifying reactions to what is, after all, only a dopey film. It may be that whistle-blowing time has arrived for this gang of pilferers of the literary treasurehouse. Michelangelo said, "Where I steal an idea, I leave my knife." Perhaps we have all been witnesses at the scene of the crime where we have failed to realize how important it was for us to identify the owner of the knife. As Socrates received the unsought gift of hemlock, so Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, he who created Sherlock Holmes and Watson and Moriarty and Colonel Sebastian Moran, receives the unsought gift of *bommage* from Spielberg and Columbus and Company; and in leaping to the defense of one whose work probably needs no defense against the nibbling of minnows, perhaps we defend ourselves.

I'll be back next time to complete the thought.

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Nancy Etchemendy wrote "The Ladies of Wahloon Lake," (August 1985). Her latest story concerns a young potter and his sisters, who search for answers in a land of dead cities and poisoned rivers . . .

The River Temple

BY
NANCY ETCHEMENDY

Friend, you have been kind to me though I am a stranger, a sick and wild-eyed traveler from a place with a name meaning little in these parts. Though I have known you but an hour, I believe you are a good man, and strong, as I myself was once. If you can bear the sight of me awhile, sit and listen. May these words of mine be like seeds that fall on glad earth, for the journey of The Book cannot end here.

They say my mother lost many children before she bore my sisters, Arain and Mera. How wonderful they must have seemed to her, for one healthy babe is treasure enough, and two at once are a miracle. My sisters came together from the womb, as much alike as two shafts of golden wheat that have sprung from the same seed. From the day of their birth, their hair was white and shining, their eyes the cool violet of river mist at dusk, and their skin like flawless ivory. In the city of Handred, it was said that they were an omen sent by Feder, and that their beauty was His mark of greatness.

My sisters were but eight years old and I a child of two when our parents were killed by raiders from Nupask. We buried our mother and father ourselves, and made a burnt offering of their hair, so that Feder would smile on Handred and grant our women many children.

We were of no high blood and might well have spent the remainder of our childhood as street urchins had it not been for the pious of the city. The pious looked kindly upon Arain and Mera because their beauty was the mark of God's favor, and they looked kindly upon me because I was

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my sisters' brother. We never lacked food or a warm hearth.

One spring evening a tall, pale woman came from the temple. She spoke at length with Arain and Mera. Later they told me that her name was Jana, and that she was the High Colonel of the Service. I had heard of the High Colonel. I knew of her importance. And, with a child's clean wisdom, I sensed that her visit would bring a great change to our lives.

Truly it did. For not long after that, Arain and Mera went off to the Great School, and I saw them much less often. Only then did I begin to understand that they were different from me. I was ordinary. I belonged and was accepted among the children in the streets as my sisters had never been. And I knew that the High Colonel would never come for me.

Instead, it was Old Mathias the potter who came for me. Seeing that I was too young to be alone so much of the time, he took me in as his apprentice. I owe Mathias a great debt. Without him I might never have known the joy of a well-chosen glaze on fine clay, the satisfaction of a beautiful form turned on a familiar wheel, the comfort of a workshop warmed by a kiln. But the time for repaying debts has long since passed, and my regrets lie inside me like jagged shards.

Friend, you have been kind to me though I am a stranger. Kirth is my name, and I was born in the north, in the city of Handred beside the mighty river Umbya. Ten miles down the river from that city stands a vast edifice, the Temple of Handred. Would to Feder that it had never been built, for it has caused great sorrow.

This shabby bundle of mine, this cursed artifact from the temple, is the reason for my journey. It is The Book of the lesser god Makna, who was known to the ancients as McKenna. I swore that I would place it in the hands of the High Colonel of Pardox in a land not far south of here called Uth, if there be any still alive in that hapless place. But I have failed. I am a man who has seen the sins of gods and the foolishness of men, and I am broken, and I am afraid to die.

Though I was their brother, and though I adored them, Arain and Mera shared a closeness in which I had no part. They were almost one person. They could speak to each other with their eyes. They could finish the half-expressed thoughts of one another. They not only looked alike; their minds ran on the same paths, through countries that seemed trackless to the rest of us. Yet Arain and Mera belonged to me as they did to no one else, for the blood of their veins ran in mine. My heart beat high when I met them in the street at noon and exchanged warm greetings

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with them while others watched in admiration.

At night Arain and Mera would often steal away from the school and run through the dark streets to the door of Mathias's workshop. There the other apprentice, Taud, and I tended the fire through the night, and slept on pallets beside the old kiln.

Arain would bring sweet cakes smuggled away from the school's kitchens, and Mera would bring wine. We four would laugh and talk for hours, far into the night. I have not forgotten those times of good company and good cheer, and the warmth of firelight on the fair and youthful faces of Arain and Mera.

Taud and I learned much. My sisters sometimes brought books with them, and in this way we learned to read. The books stirred our curiosity and made us wonder about many things that seemed strange to us, mysterious and puzzling things about Handred and the temple and the gods. To speak of these matters intrigued but frightened me, for I had a vague feeling that we would be punished if anyone heard us. Perhaps it was the retribution of Makna that I feared. I would have done better to fear Radna.

My sisters were born in good health, and they delighted in everything physical. They loved good food, and the wondrous delirium of too much wine; they excelled at sports, at hunting, at games of combat and endurance. It seemed quite natural to me when I returned early from the clay pit one evening to find them stretched before the fire with Taud, who was several years older than I. Adolescent, driven by urges that perplexed me, I envied Taud. But it was not a brother's place to speak of such desires, so I contented myself by staying out of their way so as to make it easy for them.

One night toward the end of my boyhood, my sisters came to the workshop door with books and wine. For some time, I had begun these evenings by going out to fetch firewood. There I usually dawdled, chopping more wood than we needed, in order to give them extra time alone with Taud. But this night it was chilly, and I hadn't worn a coat, so I finished more quickly than usual. I surprised them when I opened the door.

My sisters stood facing each other before the fire, Mera half dressed and Arain clad only in her boots. Taud stood in the corner near his pallet, shirtless and flushed.

"I want him again," said Arain in a low and frightening voice. "It isn't fair. He has given the seed to you twice."

"Be still, Arain," said Mera softly, glancing in my direction. "Kirth has just returned. The matter is unimportant."

But Arain remained standing with her arms bent at her sides and her body strung tightly as a bow. I could

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see that she was barely able to restrain herself from striking Mera.

"But I want . . . I want . . ." cried Arain, in a voice so full of pain that it hardly seemed to belong to her.

"But you want a child, Arain? You and I are barren," replied Mera quietly. I do not think that Arain's rage was meant so much for Mera as it was for the thing of which Mera had spoken. Arain was blinded by some passion that I will never fully comprehend. She raised her arm to strike Mera. But Mera caught her by the wrist. They were perfectly matched.

"Yes! I want a child. How can you say it is of no importance? How can I live with the knowledge that no man, no matter how many times I take his seed, will ever give me a child?" Then Arain's fury left her, and tears spilled down her cheeks as she sank to her knees on the earthen floor.

She wept quietly, and Mera held her for a long time, stroking her fine, white hair, her own cheeks glistening with tears as well.

I was not old enough to understand much of what I had seen. I knew that live, healthy infants were a treasure and a blessing from the gods. But I did not understand Arain's grief. I knew nothing of a woman's craving for children. And because so many of our women were barren, neither did I know that barrenness was not natural, and that made it all the more frightening.

• • •

Friend, I will tell you of that strange and distant land where I became a man. My people lived beside the Umbya for more than a thousand years. We dwelt there even before the War of Four Cities in which Makna took our part by rocking the mountains and causing the river to change its course so that it flowed nearer his temple. Since then the river above the temple has been wide and blue, and the flood plains lush and bountiful. But below the temple the river's name is Dred. At the confluence of the Dred and the Senek, there once stood three great cities. They have long since fallen to ruins, our ancestors who lived there having fled up the Senek to Nupask. For since the War of Four Cities, the Dred has been a river of poison, and its banks and flood plains a desert. Nothing lives there long.

A day came when I glanced up from my digging in the pit where we foraged for potter's clay and found Mera standing over me. It was the first time I had ever seen either of my sisters without the other.

"Kirth, would you come with me for a little while? We must take a walk," she said.

As I looked at her, fear robbed me of strength. The clay pit lay miles from Handred, and Mera had no hat on, nothing to protect her from the noonday sun. Her hair was wild and windblown; perhaps she had even

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run. Her face and hands were burned to a fiery pink already, and her pale eyes were shot through with blood.

I stood up, shaking with apprehension. How foreign and hostile the world seemed to me at that moment.

"Where is Arain?" I asked.

Mera smiled briefly, as if it hurt. "Arain is going away. I thought you would want to say good-bye to her."

"Away?"

"Jana came today. Arain is going to the temple." Mera took my hand. "We shouldn't tarry or we will miss her."

We started up one of the wooden ladders that stood along the edges of the pit. She climbed up first, groping for each rung and slipping often. She had been out in the sun so long that its light had nearly blinded her.

"What happened to your hat?" I asked.

"I have mislaid it," she said.

But I doubted the truth of that. I was certain that she had forgotten it. A deadly coldness spread around my heart, deep as the snow of winter. Mera felt the coldness, too; felt it so powerfully that it had distracted her from a lifelong habit — the hat, the simple tool of survival for one with colorless skin. Our sister Arain would be celebrated. The citizens of Handred would bow to her in the streets. But when she had passed by, they would speak behind their hands. For always with the Service of Feder came early death. Arain must not go to the temple. The sun itself shouted it from the silent blue sky.

"Why is she going? And for how long?" I asked when we reached the top. Mera held onto my arm as we started down the road.

"It is an honor, Kirth. Arain thirsts for knowledge, for the secrets of the temple. And Jana has promised them to her."

"But . . . but it's wrong. You should not be apart." I clung to this thought as a drowning creature to a broken branch.

"We are two people. We want different things," said Mera, but her voice shook and she did not look in my direction.

"But she will die!" I cried.

"Be still, Kirth. Why do you say such things?" she whispered. But even as she admonished me, her grip on my arm tightened.

"I am afraid," I replied.

"Yes. Perhaps I am, too," said Mera.

My friend, though Handred was a strange place, we were in some ways like any other folk. In the winter when the cold wind blew, we gathered about our fires like others of our kind. Around those fires many tales were told.

It was said that the Temple of Handred was the handiwork of Makna. It was said that he constructed it in the dim beginnings of the world, before the Great Drought, as a monument to the One God Feder and also

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as a prison for his evil enemy Radna. No mortal could have built the temple. Its walls are made of great sheets of smooth stone from some unknown quarry. And beneath its upper structures lies an earthwork of incomprehensible vastness.

Before we found The Book, I believed those tales as everyone did. But the temple was not in truth built as a prison. Many affairs of the world I do not understand, but I know what it means to serve a master. Sometimes I think that great Makna was in fact the servant of Radna, that he built the temple because Radna demanded it.

Mera was ill for many weeks after Arain went to the temple. They let me see her only because she asked for me often. Old Mathias understood about the work I left undone.

Mera's face and the backs of her hands were cruelly burned and covered with blisters. For a long time we did not know if she would ever see again. A raging fever seized her, and she could not eat. But far worse was the sickness of her heart, though she did not speak of it. She did not ask for Arain until delirium at last overcame her. Then in her ravings she cried out her sister's name again and again. I was afraid that she would die. I was in anguish, for it seemed to me that both of my sisters were slipping away before my very eyes. And so, after a time, I gathered my courage and went to the Temple of Handred to find Arain.

It was a very long walk for a hot summer day, and even though the road ran along the green verge of the Umbya, I was tired and drenched when at last I stood before the dark wooden gates of the temple. I had never been so close to them before, and I did not know how to gain entrance. It was a frightening place, a dead place, eerie and foreign. Nothing grew nearby; even birds seemed to shun it. There were no trees, no grasses; only bare, hard soil and black rock, with dreary, windowless buildings rearing among them like ancient gray monsters.

I could find no knocker or bell chain, and my fists made only a small sound like moths on the thick wood of the gates. But I was young, and with little enough trouble I scaled the mud brick wall and let myself down into a broad courtyard. Directly opposite me stood a smooth gray building with a flat roof and towering doors of green, pitted copper. There was writing incised on the doors, but I could not read it. I could make no sense of the characters, though they seemed familiar in some strange way. They had been there longer than I dared to guess. Perhaps Makna himself had graven them.

Once again I found no knocker, and this time I was at a loss about how to proceed. The courtyard was

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deserted. There was no one to be seen.

All at once a voice came from behind me. "What do you want, child?"

Startled, I whirled around to find a gaunt, pale man. His hair was thin and ragged, and his dark eyes had a milky film on them, like the protective eyelid of a hawk. I nearly cried out in revulsion.

"I must see Arain," I replied when I had mastered myself.

"You must be her brother, eh?" said the stranger.

"How did you know?"

"Not hard, child. She's told me some things about herself. Told me a lot about you, for example. Kirth, isn't it?" He grinned. A row of discolored teeth sat like headstones in his raw, swollen gums.

So hideous was he that I was suddenly overcome with unreasoning fear for Arain's safety.

"What have you done with her? I want to see her!" I cried.

"Just like her, aren't you," he muttered, spitting reddish saliva into the dust. "Don't worry yourself. I'll fetch her for you." And he strode up the stairs, pulled open the doors and disappeared through them, still muttering.

Never have the minutes passed so slowly as they did that day while I stood in the summer sun and waited for the doors of the Temple of Handred to open again. I cannot even say what it was that I feared. If I had been an animal instead of a man, I would doubtless have heeded my instincts and left that place at once, as the birds had done. As it was, I trembled and forced myself to stay.

At last the doors swung open and Arain stepped forth from the darkness. She was dressed in the long black cassock of the Service, against which her face and hands and hair shone like the moon.

"Kirth, why have you come here?" she said at once.

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came to me. My relief at seeing her alive and well in that terrible place made an idiot of me, and I stood dumbly struggling to make a sound.

"What's wrong, Kirth? You are shivering," said Arain, and swiftly she ran down the steps to enfold me in her arms, a familiar gesture, and one that had often given me great comfort. We sat together on the bottom step. With my cheek pressed against the rough, warm cloth of her cassock and my ears filled with the strong and unfaltering beat of her heart, courage came back to me.

"Who was that man?" I asked.

"Dear Kirth! Did he frighten you? That was only poor Geoff, the crazy man. He meant you no harm. But tell me why you've come."

"Mera . . . Mera has been asking for you."

At first Arain did not reply. She only looked down at the ground, and

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I could not see her face. When she spoke, her words came slowly. "Mera knows that I cannot come. It . . . it is wrong of her to cause us this grief."

"But she is sick. She doesn't know that she has asked for you. She did not send me. I came because I wanted to."

I felt her heartbeat quicken beneath the black cassock. How terrible my words must have been to her; Arain and Mera had always shared in one another's pleasure and pain. The very need for a messenger in a matter of such importance was cruel evidence of their sundering.

"She's ill from the sun. When she came to get me . . . to say good-bye to you. She forgot her hat. She is blind, and sometimes she does not know me. I'm afraid," I went on.

The small lines in Arain's face deepened as she listened. She took me by the shoulders and looked into my eyes with great urgency. "Kirth, you must do just as I say. It is forbidden for a novice to leave the temple grounds. They will stop me if they see me trying to go. But if I wait until the night, I can walk in the shadows, and no one will know. We must meet somewhere after dark."

"But where? And what if they catch you?"

"Jana is not a kind woman. If I were some other novice, I would be sent into the earthworks without the surplice. But I am stronger than Jana, and many are interested in my welfare. I do not fear her."

Even now those words of hers fill me with love and admiration. She knew well what she gambled for Mera's sake. So did I. The bodies of those sent unprotected into the earthworks were often tied to a pole and carried through Handred. Those wretches who had been made to face Radna without the surplice emerged stiff and twisted as if from spasms of intolerable terror, smeared with their own excrements. There was no more dreadful death.

"You must leave here quickly, and you must follow my instructions," said Arain. "Go back toward Handred. When you see tall trees and grasses beside the river again, you must stop at once and bathe, and wash your clothing."

"But why?"

"Promise you will do it. Then hide in the willows beside the road and wait for me. I will come. I give you my word. Now run. Run as fast as you can."

Fear of the temple and joy at having been released from its power made my legs strong and swift, made me happy to flee with the hot wind in my face. As soon as I reached a place where the banks of the Umbya were green and heavy with willows, I undressed and swam in the cold water, then rinsed my tattered clothes and laid them on the flat rocks to dry, wondering at these strange instructions. Long after dark, when frogs and

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crickets had joined the song of the mighty river, Arain came from the temple.

I asked many questions of her that night while we walked along the road to Handred. I cared nothing for the stones beneath my feet, nor for the weary distance. For Arian's answers led me to questions profounder still.

I asked her why she had told me to wash in the river.

"The temple grounds are poisoned, like the Dred," she answered. "It is thought that the poison can be washed off."

"Have you also washed in the river tonight?" I asked.

"I wash often where Cold Creek comes down from the hills. Don't be worried, little brother,"

But I *was* worried. If the temple were as foul and poisonous a place as it seemed, I asked her, why had she joined the Service? What honor could be worth this terrible price?

"In the glow of the evening fire, we have spoken of certain puzzles. For the good of us all, I wish to find their solutions." Her voice was hushed as we walked in the starlight.

"The puzzle of Makna, and of the temple?" I asked.

"Yes. Puzzles about the beginnings of things. About the present state of things. Mera and I believe that the world is not as Feder meant it. Something is wrong in our land."

I was perplexed. "Why do you think something's wrong?"

"Perhaps you recall the story of how, long ago, when Mera and I were little children, we overheard a drunken traveler in a tavern. He was from a faraway land. He had never been in Handred before. He asked a question. Do you remember what it was?"

She smiled as she asked this. The starlight did something to her eyes, turned them from pale lavender into platinum, hardened them, cooled them, and I shivered again as I had often done that day. What would a stranger have thought of my sister? Would he have thought her beautiful, or would he have shivered, too?

"He asked what the people of Handred had done to offend the gods," I replied, in the manner of one who recites lessons.

Arain looked down at the road as she continued. "Yes. He said that he had never seen a place where there was so much sickness. He had never heard of any other river that ran with poison like the Dred. He had never seen a town with so few children. And having spied Mera and me in the corner, he said that he had never seen so many monsters."

"But you never told me that!" I cried, though a great emptiness of guilt lurked inside me. For I myself had thought the same thing only a moment before. I hid behind indignation. "How could he have said such a thing? You're beautiful! You were a gift from Feder!"

Arain laughed without mirth. "To

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you, perhaps, and to the other patrons of the tavern. They beat the poor man, and threw him into the street. Nevertheless, there was truth in his words."

"But you and Mera are not monsters!"

"We are different from others. In that way we are indeed monsters. You are too much accustomed to our appearance, Kirth. And besides, the stranger was right. The women of Handred have brought forth creatures that can hardly be called human. Too many of them. Every traveler notices it."

"But what does it matter?"

"I wonder. We want to know why it matters, if it does. We want to know what poisoned the river. We want to know what killed the three cities, what is buried beneath our temple, what it is that Makna commanded us to guard for eternity. We believe that the answer to one great question will answer all the others. We want to know what Radna is, Kirth. Only the secret lore of the Service of Feder can provide the answer. One of us had to go."

It was not as simple as Mera had said. They were not two people who wanted different things. I was never to know how they had decided it, by drawing straws or reading leaves, or perhaps some game of combat in which each of them fought for the other one's life. Who could tell the winner from the loser?

Then the great wheel of the world seemed broken from its center. The stars above my head danced in chaos though I beseeched them for order, and the dark foreboding swept over me again. My ears rang with the force of blood in my frantic heart, for now I knew as my sisters did that without some miracle, Arain would die in this quest. No human being possessed the strength to delve far into Radna's secrets without forfeiting life itself. Even the little children of Handred knew that.

Later, as we sat in the candlelight beside Mera's bed, I watched Arain hold her, silken hair mingling with silken hair, pale skin with pale skin, as if the two women were a single creature. And it came to me that if one of my sisters died, the other would soon follow. Imagining the hollowness of a world without them, I made a compact of my own. I swore that I would die with them if matters came to such a pass.

My friend, not even Great Feder foresaw The Drought, and the fall of the civilization of the ancients. Makna endeavored to preserve the temple guard, but those descendants of the ancients were brutes in a land of famine. And there are limits even to the power of the gods.

Makna wrote that Radna is the greatest power the world has ever known, respecting no barriers, whose merest whisper slays men and beasts

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and green things alike, whose touch is carried on the wind, in the rain, from which there is no escape.

After Arain sat with her that night, Mera soon recovered from her illness. In time, Mera sought and was awarded a commission as an officer of the army of Handred. Her old enemy the sun might have kept her from success in that profession. But I designed and fitted her with a protective device made of colored glass for her eyes. And between the two of us, we concocted an ointment made from white clay and the oil of sheep's wool. This she smeared on her face and hands to ward off the fierce light of the day. Such a skillful warrior was she, and such a frightening picture did she make on the field of battle, that she moved up the ranks with great speed until she was soon general of the army of Handred. So well did the soldiers love her and so well did they fight for her that for a time the Nupaskans were forced back into their own lands. Mera never forgot that Nupaskans had orphaned her.

Arain pursued her goals more quietly, but with equal success. She was right about Jana. Jana was never able to punish her much for her various rebellions, and Arain made many friends among the other members of the Service. When Jana died from the long, slow sickness that always took High Colonels in the end, the election of her successor was brief and decisive. Arain became the High Colonel of the Service of Feder six years after she entered the temple.

Not long after Arain became High Colonel, I left the workshop of Mathias and took a place of my own. He had instilled in me such a love of the craft, had taught me so well the magic of clay and fire, that I soon became the most prosperous potter in Handred. The wealthy, the pious, the high of name sought me out to make beautiful pieces for them. Soon there were clays and glazes that bore my name, and whose secrets only I knew. Soon I had apprentices of my own.

Whenever we could spare a few hours, my sisters and I would gather around some hearth as we had always done, to enjoy good wine and food and the easy conversation of kin who have become old friends. Often, we met in a firelit room at Mera's great lodge, or in my workshop as we had of old.

But now it was only Mera who seduced the apprentices. Arain came with me to fetch firewood on these occasions. Once I asked her why, for this and several other changes in her had begun to make me uneasy.

As I piled split wood into her arms, she replied, "I do not desire it anymore."

"I wonder if you are well," I said. Her skin had always been very white, but now there was no ruddiness in her cheeks, and her eyes had become

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milky like those of an old dog. She tired easily and often lay down and fell asleep while Mera and I were still talking and laughing.

"I am well enough," she said.

"Do you still bathe often in water from Cold Creek?" I asked.

She only smiled and said, "Do not be worried, little brother."

One afternoon when Arain and I arrived at Mera's lodge laden with cheese and sweet wine and bread, we found her seated alone in the kitchen beside a dying fire. The usual retinue of servants and favorite officers was nowhere to be seen. Mera was slumped in a hard chair with her boots off and her shirttail out, an empty wine bottle in one hand and a goblet on the floor beside her.

She did not greet us as we put down our packages. It was late autumn, and the room was so cold that our breath hung in white plumes on the air. She seemed not to notice. I set about stoking the fire at once.

The white ointment on Mera's face told an eloquent story. It bore the signs of a dusty road, heavy sweat, and tears. Yet we had heard of no raids or battles that day, and she had no wounds that we could see.

"You have brought more wine," she said. "Shall we open a bottle?" She sounded composed. It would have been difficult for strangers to tell that she was already very drunk.

Arain opened one of the bottles. In a moment the fire was roaring and all three of us had full goblets.

Then Arain asked, "What happened, Mera?"

Mera laughed loudly. The harsh, bitter tone of her voice made me think of carrion birds, and I was afraid. "A month ago I sent my friend Hald with a small patrol down the river Dred. It was selfish of me. I should not have done it. But he said that he wanted to go." She laughed again, the kind of laugh that verges on tears, and said, "They always want to go."

She took a long draft of her wine. "There was a rumor that the Nupaskans had discovered a way to protect themselves from the poison. I suspected that a raiding band was camped on the Dred below the temple, and that they planned to attack it by surprise."

Mera leaned forward, clutching the arms of her chair. "Hald came back with his report today. I sat with him as he died three hours ago. He rode to the three cities and back searching for Nupaskans that existed only in my mind."

Arain and I did not speak at first. Not even the old men by the fires told of anyone who had gone to the three cities and come back alive.

"I am sorry," said Arain.

"But surely he knew what would happen," I said. "Why did he go so much farther than he had to?"

Mera smiled bitterly. "He thought he had found a way to protect himself and his men. A secret invention of his

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own. A kind of suit. Like the surplice, Arain. He should have taken my advice and gone to talk to you."

But Arain shook her head. "You are too harsh with yourself. If he wanted to try his luck, why should anyone stop him? Besides, we need to know of the cities. Tell me. Did he find out anything?" Arain's eyes gleamed hungrily in the red light of the flames, and my fear grew like a fire. A small voice inside me asked who this unfeeling woman could be. Surely not the one who had risked death so that she could come to Mera's sickbed.

Mera looked at her in silence more deep and piercing than any words. Then she said slowly, "He found nothing."

Arain turned away, and without looking up said, "Try to forgive me my greed. I desire this knowledge for the good of us all. It overpowers me. The answer is so near."

Mera did not reply, and Arain went on like a river flooded with rain. "Hald was strong, and he had a strong mind. No one could have stopped him. What could we have told him? Only that the surplice of Makna does not work. What would that have mattered to him if he had one of his own design?

If Mera had not been so drunk, I am certain that she would not have said what she did then. "We could have told him about The Book of Makna, Arain. He didn't have to die."

At that moment, without wishing it, I became the keeper of fearful secrets. If only I could have smoothed them from my mind as I would have smoothed blemishes from a newly turned pot. But a man's mind is not enough like clay.

It was said that, garbed in the sacred surplice of Makna, one could brave the poison of Radna with impunity. I knew that Arain went into the earthworks, sometimes to fulfill the sacred and mysterious duties of the High Colonel, sometimes to fulfill her passion for knowledge. In those dank corridors, only the surplice of Makna stood between her and death. But Radna was strong, and the surplice was ancient. Now my greatest fears were confirmed. The surplice of Makna did not work. Arain was dying. But what of the "Book," of which Mera had spoken? If it could have saved Hald, might it not save Arain as well?

"The Book of Makna? What is that?" My words cut deep into the silence of the room.

Arain stood before the fire, lowering her head and closing her eyes as if to shut out some part of the world. "We know too little of The Book to speak of it yet."

But Mera, churlish with drink, snarled, "You are wrong, my sister. *You are wrong.*"

"Please, Mera. We are not sure yet."

Mera rose from her chair and stood swaying beside it. "I am not a god,

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Arain. I am a woman, with an army of mortals who bleed and die. Our enemies outnumber us five to one. Will you wait until the Nupaskans raze the temple, thinking to wrest some nonexistent power from us? Will you wait until Radna is loosed on the land and all the people of the rivers lie rotting?"

"Why should the Nupaskans fear stories from an old book, words unraveled by the high priest of the enemy's temple? It is not as easy as you think, Mera. Wine has made you stupid," said Arain sharply.

To this exchange of anger, I listened in confusion. What terrible truth did The Book of Makna contain? I could not yet guess. Whatever the secret was, my sisters stood unmoving on opposite sides of it, split in their thinking as I had never seen them before.

In her drunken rage, Mera baited Arain once more. "It's a shame, isn't it, colonel, after all you've gambled. A shame to find out that Makna was nothing but a vassal and the ancients a race of fools!"

No arrow could have pierced Arain more deeply than those bitter words of Mera's. I saw her fists tighten and the veins rise in her neck, saw the moment in which passion overcame her. Mera must have seen it as well, but she was sodden with wine and could not defend herself. Arain struck her full on the jaw, coming from below so that Mera's head was snapped back and she fell into the stone wall and lay unmoving on the floor.

Arain steadied herself on the table. Her hands shook. Her face was as white as limestone. Her breath came quickly and raggedly and she coughed, staggering with the pain of it. Then, unspeaking, she stumbled from the room. I heard the hooves of a horse galloping away toward the temple.

When she awoke the next morning, Mera could not remember clearly what had happened. I myself was confused in my feelings toward Arain. I understood her wrath, even believed that it was justified. Yet when I looked at Mera, her jaw purplish, her cheek and tongue swollen, I was angry at Arain. She had not wept. She had not said that she was sorry.

Nevertheless, when I had recounted the night's events to Mera, she said that I must put anger aside, that if ever there had been a time for union among the three of us, it was now. For what she had said about the Nupaskans was true. They had raised an army far larger than ours, and their goal was to destroy the Temple of Handred.

"Because I love Arain, I will make this compromise," said Mera. "I will keep the secret of The Book a little longer, from all but you, Kirth."

Then, in words thick and slurred from her injury, she revealed to me the tale of The Book of Makna.

Arain had found it in one of the small outbuildings of the temple,

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among the haunted hulks of primeval machines. The door to the building was sealed by Makna when the course of the Umbya was changed; but for Arain's daring, it might have remained so forever.

It is no ordinary book of paper, else because of its great age it would long ago have fallen to dust. It is made of some wondrous metal that does not rust, finely wrought into thin sheets and graven with some unknowable stylus. Strange are those words, written in the language of the ancients. Stranger yet is the story they tell, tangled and filled with names that have no meaning to us.

My sisters had not yet finished deciphering The Book. The job of translation was complex, and some of the pages were damaged while others were missing altogether. But some things were clear already. Mera was right. If Hald had known of The Book and its message, he might easily have been dissuaded from going down the Dred.

Before I left her that morning, Mera took my hand and said, "These are black thoughts, Kirth, but I cannot ignore them as Arain does. If Handred cannot stop the Nupaskans, Radna will be released into the light of day; Arain and I will be among the first to die, either by the hand of the Nupaskans or by the hand of Radna. If you ever loved us, promise me one thing."

"What is that?" I asked.

"That you will not let the secret of The Book die with us."

I thought of that oath I had sworn long ago when first I learned of the perilous path my sisters had chosen. I had sworn that if they died, I would follow them. I had sworn it for good reasons, selfish though they might have been, and I could not yet bring myself to break it. So I refused to promise. It was foolish and cruel of me.

My friend, great Makna has said that Radna was created by the ancients in the time of Plenty before the Great Drought. They knew well the danger of the thing they created; they knew that it could never be destroyed. Feder commanded that the temples be built. He commanded that Radna be divided into pieces and trapped in bits of glass, poured into sacred vessels and buried deep in solid stone. But when the Drought came, Feder went away, leaving only his minion Makna. Makna helped us to remember that we must guard the temple for eternity so that Radna could never harm us.

In the tongue of the immortals, Makna wrote: "God help our children if the facilities at Hanford and Paradox Basin ever begin to deteriorate, because on any human scale this material will be lethal forever. They might not even remember what it is by that time."

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. . .

In the months that followed, I saw Arain and Mera seldom. Arain was busy translating The Book. She worked on it like one possessed, setting it aside only when matters of the temple demanded her attention, or when she was too sick for anything but sleep. Twice in this time Mera and I came to her in her dismal quarters at the temple.

We did not stay long, for Arain was loath to put away her work. Once, though we did not expect it, she rose and walked with us through the great copper doors and into the temple courtyard. There in the sunlight, I saw how Arain had changed. It was no longer difficult to tell my sisters apart. Arain's beautiful face was wasted and lined, and her eyes were almost opaque. She walked like an old woman, tired of life. In the courtyard she stood up straight and asked if I would honor her by designing her burial urn. Then Mera turned away and bowed her head to keep us from seeing her tears.

Mera, too, was busy in those last months. There were raids in the open country along the old course of the Umbya. We heard that a new and warlike leader had arisen among the Nupaskans, one who renewed the old song of vengeance, who cried out that Handred must be made to suffer for having laid waste to the Nupaskans' rightful property — the lands of the Dred. There were many skirmishes, and the armies of Handred lost ground. Then, at the end of the summer, Mera's spies brought word that the Nupaskans had amassed their forces on the other side of the Umbya in preparation for an attack on the temple.

I do not know what passed between my sisters at this news. Perhaps Mera tried to tell the Nupaskans of The Book; this I knew was her plan, and she intended to try it even if she had to deny Arain's wishes. Perhaps Arain was right in the end, for the Nupaskans did attack.

In the next days, messengers came and went between the town and the army, while the citizens of Handred did what they could to prepare for a siege, harvesting everything from the fields, reinforcing the high wall that surrounded the city, manufacturing arrows and spears and preparing vats of hot oil to cast down on our enemies.

At first the messengers were exultant; Mera drove the Nupaskans back. And we rejoiced. Then, on the second day, a messenger came back who was breathless and bloody. There had been a setback. I sat on the wall that night, looking down to the southeast where the rising moon hung deep red and the torches of the legions flickered. And I thought of my sisters, and I wished that I were not among those who had been left behind to protect the city.

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The third day, a messenger came whose eyes were full of teror. "The Nupaskans are in the temple!" he cried. Then my heart twisted within me like a deer that bolts for its life, and I ran to the top of the wall, expecting to see the roiling dust of the approaching Nupaskan army on the road. Instead, I saw that the dust of the battle was already settling. Far in the distance rode a single horseman, galloping toward the town. The silence of doom had descended on the land.

In an hour's time the gates were thrown open and the rider entered Handred.

The horse was half-mad, its mouth flecked with foam and blood. Though the rider had no wounds, he was nearly dead, bound to his steed with a length of rope, perhaps by his own hand. The horse's neck was caked with the man's blood-filled vomit. He writhed and bellowed as we lifted him from the saddle. Tied to his breast was a bundle inscribed with my name.

It was The Book. There was a message from Mera scribbled on a piece of blood-smeared cloth.

"Our brother, a friend writes this. Arain is dead. I will be with her soon. The earthworks are opened. In the name of Feder, take The Book to Paradox. Warn them of Radna. Will you promise me now?"

How I regret not having given my promise to Mera sooner. What a comfort it might have been to her in those last hours. Empty words are these now. The wrong can never be undone, though I did as she asked, though I ran away, leaving for carrion my sisters and the land where I was born. It comes to nothing, for now I go to join them. I did not run fast enough.

Rolled up with the message were two locks of shining white hair, as much alike as rays of sunlight. I wept. So bitter was I that I cursed Feder then. I made no offering of my sisters' hair, for there would be no more children in Handred.

I will describe to you the day of doom, my friend. I see it in my mind as if I stood on the banks of the Umbya now. No birds fly there, not even vultures, though the smell of death is heavy. The animals that lived among the grasses are still. Trees stand beside the river, along the roads, in courtyards where we laughed with the music of fountains. But all the leaves are dull, dried upon the limb. They rattle in the wind. In my workshop stand pots that will never know the kiln; the clay in the bins has hardened. Men are dead beside their plows, women beside their children. My sisters lie in the sun, unburied. Never again will we sit in contentment before the fire. In a great circle, a month's journey from side to side, nothing is left alive. Life has been devoured by the dark creature

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Radna, bane of the gods, plague of the ancients. But it matters little now.

I have seen your land, my friend. Your people stand tall and strong. Children play before every door, and old men sit in the sun. But I say to you now, look at me, and see what you might become. Behold a shrunken creature, pallid and mangy, stinking with sores, weak to death and afraid to face the gods. Then consider the Temple of Paradox.

Take The Book, friend. I have no better way to repay your kindness. Keep it. Do not scatter it. And remember my tale. Perhaps some morning you will ask about the road to Paradox.

It is so cold today.

A defense against cancer can be cooked up in your kitchen.

There is evidence that diet and cancer are related. Follow these modifications in your daily diet to reduce chances of getting cancer:

1. Eat more high-fiber foods such as fruits and vegetables and whole-grain cereals.

2. Include dark green and deep yellow fruits and vegetables rich in vitamins A and C.

3. Include cabbage, broccoli, brussels sprouts, kohlrabi and cauliflower.

4. Be moderate in consumption of salt-cured, smoked, and nitrite-cured foods.

5. Cut down on total fat intake from animal sources and fats and oils.

6. Avoid obesity.

7. Be moderate in consumption of alcoholic beverages.

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Here is a story of a man in love with refinement and sensibility who finds that, in this world, these qualities are far too fleeting.

A Knight of Antiquity

BY

ROBERT CHARLES WILSON

It seemed increasingly to Morgan that he had been born out of his time and that the passage of time, like an ocean current far from shore, had merely carried him a greater distance from what was good, noble, and true. In middle life, becalmed after a stormy divorce, he moved his antique and curio business to a location up the coastal highway, where he owned a beach house overlooking an eroded shale bed where herring gulls roosted. Weekdays and Saturdays he sold delicate bone china and authentic scrimshaw to stupidly dressed tourists; Sundays he combed the windy shore adjacent to his property. Certain shells had a modest value, and he was soothed by the rondeau of sun, cloud, water, rock.

He found the castaway woman on a Sunday. She lay on a bar of sand amidst the rocks like a sea-thing, pale and boneless. The salt water had leached all color from her clothing and her skin. Her lips were white; her eyelids were two slips of rice paper. When he perceived the faint spasmodic motion of her breasts, Morgan wrapped her in his alpaca jacket and carried her to the beach house. Morgan was not muscular, but the woman was light, almost evanescent; strong sunlight, he thought dazedly, might pass through her entirely.

He had begun dialing for an ambulance when she opened her eyes and sat up, dripping sand and brine into the sofa.

Her name was Elizabeth Llewellyn, she said — a faint voice but firm, like the chiming of faraway bells — and she was off H.M.S. *Courier*, and she was very grateful for his help and didn't want to trouble him any further, but was it possible she might

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have something to eat?

Months later he would drive to the city library many miles away, not to challenge her simple assertion but to confirm it. Mute with wonder, he found the entry in an old Lloyd's registry. H.M.S. *Courier*, out of Liverpool, for Boston: lost at sea with all hands, sometime in the late autumn of 1887.

But that was later.

In the beginning he simply took her word for it, and fed her brimming bowlfuls of Campbell's Pea Soup and Hearty Beef Broth until she had acquired some color and was able to stand up unassisted. His business fell into neglect, and often during this time he would open the shop for only an hour or two in the afternoon, that mostly to care for the merchandise. It was the off season in any case, and there was seldom a customer to disturb the shadowy privacy or tread dirt over the pinewood floors. One week the only sale Morgan made was from the postcard rack.

She wouldn't talk about herself, except to say that she was a Welsh girl by birth, and that she had spent most of her life in London, and that she had been bound for America when the *Courier* went down in a storm. Morgan supposed it was some salt-water phenomenon that had preserved her, her body white and pulseless in the deep canyons of the sea, until she was cast ashore and revived by the wintry sunlight. He sensed her frailty and tried not to be the occasion of any profound shock: though she knew already from the wall calendar that nearly a century had passed since she was set adrift, and seemed not unduly disturbed by it. She would not speak of her past in any detail and was guarded in her curiosity about the present. Morgan was shocked when he came home and found her sorting through a box of Emily's uncollected clothing, the flotsam of his recent divorce.

"Morgan?" She held up one of Emily's old brassieres by its frayed right strap. "What *is* this?"

"An item of underclothing," Morgan said carefully.

"Female underclothing?"

He nodded.

She held it against herself in a motion that was at once innocent and arousing. "Worn — like so?"

"Yes."

"Your wife's?"

"Yes."

"You're married."

"No." Beyond the window the sun had set and the light was draining from the sky. Her face and hands were almost supernaturally pale in the near darkness. "We were divorced."

"I see." She studied the tiny hooks and eyes. "May I try it?"

Her face was lovely, heart-shaped and china white; and instead of answering, Morgan knelt on the bed and touched her cheek and for the first

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time they kissed.

He slept with her through the night and into the morning. The telephone woke him.

"Morgan!"

He held the receiver in his hand, startled into immobility.

"Morgan, are you there?"

"I'm here." It was Emily. He felt a stuporous surge of guilt. Beside him, Beth turned languidly in the bed.

"It's been so long since we talked," Emily said. Her voice was throaty over the telephone, and Morgan thought she might have been drinking. "I talked to Ed Gleick the other day. He was up by your shop. He said you were closed. The beach house was locked up, too, but he said he saw you walking down along the beach. I just wanted to find out if everything is O.K."

"Everything is fine," Morgan said.

"You never come into town anymore. People keep asking about you. I don't know what to say. I don't want to think I've turned you into a hermit."

"How's Chavez?" Morgan said.

She was briefly silent. "Chavez is history," she said. "He took off a few months back with a girl from the community college. Zoology major. They're in Oregon, studying wildlife. Jake, I presume, is still stalking the wild pussy." She laughed, not happily. "He sent me a postcard. He's a real thoughtful guy."

"I'm sorry," Morgan said.

"Don't be. It was doomed. I guess you probably knew that, even Back When."

"That didn't make it any easier."

"No. I suppose not." She added, "Are you seeing anybody?"

"Not . . . exactly."

"I'll be brutally honest. Ed Gleick said he saw you with a woman."

"Ed is very observant."

"Ed is snoopy as hell. He made sure I was the first to know. But what the heck. It was an excuse to call."

"She's just somebody I met," Morgan said.

"Well, that's good. That's great. It's better than moldering away in that damp old house. Morgan, listen, I have a plan."

He said with much foreboding, "Plan?"

"This coming Friday. It'll be great. I talked to some of the old gang. Andy and Claretta, Tommy, Joanne, you know. They all want to see you. So I said, well, we'll hop in the van and we'll drive up there and land on his doorstep. A couple of cartons of Bud, some mixed nuts — a traveling party. They wanted to do it impromptu, but I thought I'd call and fink on them. You might want to sweep the floors or something."

Her heartiness was false and it saddened him. He looked at Beth again. "I don't think —"

"You don't have to. It's settled. Friday. See you then."

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He thought about calling back and canceling — would have, perhaps, if not for that lingering reluctance to hurt Emily's feelings. What worried him was the effect all this might have on Beth. Beth Llewellyn, he thought, was like a piece of fine china: she had survived the transit of time, like the things in his shop, miraculously preserved; and he was afraid the twentieth century might contaminate her the way industrial pollution erodes the delicate lines of ancient statuary. He was disturbed when he found her in the back bedroom watching television.

The volume was up. She sat poised in front of the box, smiling, her hands folded into her lap. She wore a pair of Morgan's denims and a plaid shirt. "I learned how to make it work," she said proudly. "Morgan, it's marvelous!"

She was watching a game show. The contestants were guessing the value of expensive consumer items. There was a BMW on stage next to a chromium dinette set.

She said, "Do people ordinarily dress like that?"

Morgan glanced at the screen. "Pretty much, yeah."

"So — I wouldn't be out of place as I am."

"Not particularly."

"There was a good story before this," she said. "About a forest ranger and a dog. The colors were unusual." Credits appeared over the game show; the announcer shrieked out a list of sponsors. "That means it's over," Beth sighed.

"Maybe there's something on another channel," Morgan said.

She looked up quickly. "'Channel'?"

It's beginning, Morgan thought, chilled.

They arrived early Friday evening. Anita breezed in with Saran-wrapped bowls of resinous sour cream dip and saltless potato chips in glossy bags. Ed Gleick, who owned controlling interest in an escort agency, shouldered an enormous cassette player through the doorway and onto Morgan's mahogany sideboard. There were maybe twenty people in all, two cars and a van. He recognized most of the faces.

Emily came in last. Morgan was astonished to see how much she had aged. It had happened this way with others among his friends: they would look twenty years old until they were thirty-five, and then the years would tumble down all at once like the brickwork of a condemned house. Lines had sprung out from her eyelids; her mouth was framed by a deep V that suggested too much laughing or crying. Her hair was long and loose and a little bit frazzled. She was putting on weight. He was surprised how alien, how *other* she looked, as if they had not shared a decade of their lives.

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He circled away toward the kitchen, where he could watch the party in relative privacy.

Beth came out from the bedroom then, looking bemused by the music but otherwise cheerful. She circulated, not stopping too long (as Morgan had instructed) in any one place, for fear of betraying her strange provenance, but learning names and smiling generously. Morgan had made up a cover story for her: she was a graduate student from an Eastern college touring for the summer. Her specialty, if the issue was forced, was Dickens. She had read most of Dickens. She glided by, Ed Gleick trailing her, and Morgan heard the words "industrial revolution . . . the plight of the poor."

She blended. At the same time, little things set her apart: her gait, her restraint, her delicacy of motion. She walked, but the effect was of an aristocratic glide.

Emily came and stood beside him, a paper cup in her hand. "She's lovely."

"Thank you."

"How'd you meet?"

"On the beach," Morgan said.

"We talked," Emily said. "She's very nice. Reserved. British?"

"By birth."

"Lovely accent. She's kind of naive, though." She looked at Morgan. "I guess she'd have to be."

He gazed at her. "That's one of those I've-been-drinking-too-much remarks."

"No, I didn't mean it that way . . . I mean, yes, I've probably been drinking too much, but — well, you know, when we were together I always had this image of the kind of person you thought I ought to be. Refined. Innocent. Incapable of sin, pure in word and deed. I consoled myself that nobody in the real world *could* be like that — I mean, it was just flat impossible. But there she is. Or appears to be."

"She's young," Morgan said.

"Looks like you've got a good quarter century on her. But listen, I don't mean to bitch. Your happiness is important. I know I haven't always acted that way. If this works out for you, fine . . ." She drank, somewhat convulsively, Morgan thought, from her paper cup.

"Thanks," he said, and was shocked again: the intimacy was gone between them, had utterly evaporated. They couldn't make conversation without kicking each other's ankles.

"Sometimes these things don't work out, you know, Morgan. I speak from experience. Some things are too good to be true. I just wanted to say —" She touched his arm. "If you need, well, somebody to talk to, a place to go — " And stopped, obviously embarrassed. "Anyway, she's a lovely girl. We had a nice talk. She wants me to lend her some books."

"Books?"

"I was talking up Simone de Beauvoir, that kind of thing. I don't think

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she's even heard of the women's movement."

"Probably not," Morgan said.

"Weird."

It was what Emily, in the old days, would have called a good party: it went on too long and the music was too loud and everybody got tired and irritable. A John Fogerty cassette rewound itself obsessively on the tape player. Morgan found himself trailing Beth, resenting her laughter and her easy conviviality, thickly angry that she was so obviously enjoying herself. It was like seeing some noble sentiment — love, he thought, or hate — distorted into a greeting card homily.

Ed Gleick retreated into the bathroom periodically, doing lines of cocaine off a hand mirror; Morgan declined the invitation. And he was drunkenly outraged when he saw Gleick leading Beth in by the hand. "Leave her the fuck alone," Morgan said.

Gleick feigned astonishment. "Why, Morgan. It's not like you to deny a lady her pleasure."

"It's all right," Beth said hastily. "I was just —"

"It's *not* all right." Morgan looked at Gleick and suddenly despised him: despised the flashy fake-casual clothes, the tanning-studio tan, the pockets of fat he hadn't been able to jog away. It was as if Ed Gleick had become everything he wanted to protect Beth from, a walking catalog of self-indulgence and corruption. "I want you — to leave her — alone."

Gleick pouted. "When did you get up on your high horse, Morgan? Jesus! I think the salt air's getting to you."

Morgan felt his fists clench . . . but then Emily slipped between them, took Gleick by the shoulders, and steered him away. "Come on, Ed. Party's over." And to Morgan: "Thanks. We all had a good time. Really."

The house was empty within minutes.

Beth wouldn't let him touch her when they went to bed.

"You're drunk," she said. "You stink of beer."

He woke up in the dark, cotton-mouthed, and found her sitting naked in the curve of the bay window watching the moon across a ribbon of sea. Her eyes were wide, entranced. Morgan fixed her a tumbler of milk laced with brandy. She accepted it and shivered.

Morgan put a blanket over her shoulders.

"It was horrible," she said. Her voice was a whisper; her eyes were fixed and distant. "She broke up in the storm. The *Courier*, I mean. There were voices in the dark. The drowning people. And the roar of the sea, like a huge angry animal —"

He seemed to hear it now, in the rush and recession of the waves. His head ached. He felt old, ancient.

She leaned into his arms.

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"I hated the woman then. The old Romany woman. I wanted to die like everyone else. Before the storm, you see, it all seemed so harmless. She looked at my palms. She discussed my business in America. She said the ship would sink, with all hands, but that I needn't fear the sea — the sea wouldn't harm me, she said, not if I floated in it forever — if only I would say a few words in her language, and prick my thumbs, and make a promise.

"Then I remember the ship breaking up, and a terrible time in the cold water . . . and then nothing . . . so *much* nothing . . ."

"Come back to bed," Morgan told her.

But her eyes were on the sea again.

"I have to leave this place," she said. "Soon."

She grew increasingly restless after the party. Television bored her. She was disconsolate for most of a month. Morgan drove her to the antique shop, two miles south on the highway. He thought she might be able to do some of the sales chores or take over the books.

She was fascinated by the car. A morning fog had come in from the sea and spilled over the highway in wisps. Pines rose up the steep hillside, cloistered and dark. Beth pressed her nose against the passenger window.

"So fast," she murmured.

The shop was ordinary, a stucco building set back in a coppice of pines in what was not quite a town: a filling station, a highway patrol outpost, a general store. The sign was discreet. Most of what he sold was conventional Americana, but there were some genuinely valuable pieces among the stock he had transported up from the city. Inside, Morgan switched on a space heater and pointed out his prize pieces. An ebonized E. W. Godwin chair, inconspicuous in the corner . . . a Fabergé *samorodok* cigarette case in the counter next to the scrimshaw . . . a pair of Saunders and Shepherd silver and cut-glass claret jugs in the shape of blank-eyed geese . . .

"They're very nice," Beth said. "I suppose."

Her halfheartedness wounded him. He turned away, wanting to say, "*You ought to understand, you, of all people. . . .* Emily had told him it was his saving grace, the love he languished on these fragile pieces. He loved them, he supposed, *because* they were fragile, and because they had escaped by some miracle the travail of the twentieth century. In their own way, he thought, they were the last of a noble line; a direct line of descent from the Bayeux Tapestry and the *Morte d'Arthur,* a dream of nobility that had been shattered by the rude and horrible noise of the modern world.

He took from a locked cabinet his most treasured piece, a pastel Royal Lancastrian dish with decoration on a

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nautical theme . . . but Beth had turned her back, had gone to the window, and was peering into the parking lot with a strange intensity.

"I want to learn to drive," she said. "Please, Morgan, will you teach me?"

He did. He sat next to her daily as she turned the car in cautious circuits through the parking lot, her tongue between her teeth. He did as she asked, even though it seemed she was moving farther away from him with every inch they traversed.

She was a quick study. Within a month she was borrowing the car routinely (and illegally), though Morgan begged her not to. At first she asked for money. To pay for gas, she said. Then she stopped asking, and borrowed the car anyway, and was gone for days at a time.

It was harrowing. He felt as if some essential part of himself were being torn away. Alone, he couldn't sleep. She wouldn't say where she went, or why, or what she did there. More frustrating, in its way, was the physical change in her: she came back seeming healthier and would wake, after even a single night in the beach house, with her old pallor restored.

"You owe me something," Morgan said finally, although he couldn't bring himself to be angry with her any more than he could be angry with his Royal Lancastrian or his Edwardian escritoire with the sycamore marquetry: "An explanation, at least."

"I owe you for rescuing me," she said gravely, her head tilted to one side, her slender neck pale and dazzling. "And I've thanked you for that. More than once."

"It's not that simple."

She gazed at him steadily. "You love your wife, don't you, Morgan?"

"Is it Emily that's bothering you? You know we're divorced —"

"You say that. But connections between people go very deep sometimes. They're not always," and she frowned, "not always easy to break."

And then one day she left and didn't come back at all.

It was raining when the telephone rang. Morgan had put himself to sleep on the sofa with a bottle of white wine the night before, and now — the light failing outside the window, another day past — he was caught between wakefulness and sleep. The radio in the bedroom droned a weather report. Tropical storm off the coast. Morgan imagined he could feel it rolling toward him across the water, a vast tumbril of a high-pressure cell.

He picked up the receiver, finally, and there was Emily's voice, stunningly familiar. "Morgan? I was worried about you."

He didn't say anything. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"I know Beth is gone," Emily said. "I just wanted to make sure you were O.K."

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"You've seen her?"

"A couple of times. She dropped by the apartment." There was a pause. "Morgan, she told me about herself. I mean, how you found her, and where she came from."

"That's . . . probably a mistake."

"It was only me she told. She's smart enough to be circumspect."

"I hope so."

"She was worried about you, too. *She's really very wise about men.*"

"You called to tell me that?"

"I'm not gloating." He heard the distant click of her cigarette lighter. "I'm hardly in a position to gloat, am I? The original middle-aged fool. I know what it's like."

"Beth isn't Chavez," Morgan said coldly.

"You mean she isn't a fraud? I'll grant you. But I imagine it feels the same." She drew in her breath. "Ah, Morgan, it's a shitty life sometimes."

"I'm hung over," he realized.

"You don't surprise me. Maybe I shouldn't have called." She added, "In some better world, you know, we could console each other. In some better world I could say, hey Morgan, come on over, we'll build a fire and tell each other how damn dumb we are. And maybe get warm. In some better world. But I guess we're stuck with this one."

"How recently did you see her?"

She sighed. "Monday."

"She looked healthy?"

"She's doing O.K."

"Do you know where she's staying?"

"No."

"But she must still be in the city." He said, "She's got my car."

"Something tells me it's not the car you're worked up about."

"I would like her to . . . explain things."

"Are you sure?"

"What does that mean?"

"*Nothing. But she did talk to me,* Morgan. And I think it would probably be better if you just forgot about her for a while."

"Did she say that?"

"Not in so many words. But that was the gist of it, yeah."

Morgan sank back into the sofa. "She doesn't know what she's saying."

"The knight errant routine. Wow. It's kind of charming, actually. The trouble is, Morgan, that code of chivalry of yours has quite a kick in it. I mean, I know what it's like to fall from grace. I've been there."

"I want to find her," Morgan said.

"It's pointless. Anyway, you'd look silly waiting for a bus in this weather."

"You're sure you don't know where she is?"

"I'm tired of answering this question, Morgan! I've been getting it from you and Ed Gleick —"

"Ed Gleick is looking for her?"

"Oh, Christ. He said he saw her down on Merchant Street, all right? He wants to offer her a contract. No, I don't have her address. No, I don't

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have her phone number. Morgan, listen . . ."

"What?"

"I just wanted to say — " Static rang down the line. "If you do come into town, you need someplace to stay, come on by. I mean, what the hell. The storm and everything . . ."

He understood what she was offering. And for a moment he wanted it, too — the acceptance, the continuity. It *would* be reassuring.

He ran his fingers through his hair. "Emily, you have to understand. There are certain things I just can't forgive."

"Give it some consideration, Morgan. This is the last time I'll ask."

He rented a car at the Greyhound station the next morning and cruised up and down Merchant Street until twilight. It was a tawdry, low-rent neighborhood of Victorian walk-ups and failing businesses (shoe-repair shops, laundries, a boarded-up surplus outlet) deserted under the assault of the weather. The rain came down like artillery fire, and Morgan had resolved to find a hotel room somewhere when he saw Ed Gleick climb out of his silver Mercedes and pop up a glossy black umbrella.

Morgan parked on the next block and crossed against the light.

Gleick's broad back moved through veils of rain, past the shoe shop with its Cat's Paw sticker, under a halo of yellow streetlight, into a doughnut shop with grimy plate glass windows.

Morgan hesitated outside. The glass was thick with condensation. He saw Gleick's silhouette quaver into a chair. He was alone for a moment, then a woman approached him.

He spoke to her, pointed at the chair opposite.

The woman hesitated, then nodded and sat down.

Her shape was familiar.

Morgan moved into the doorway then, water puddling around his shoes, angry and uncertain. They were there at the table, Ed Gleick and Beth, talking. She wore a black satin jacket with a Rolling Stones imprimatur stenciled on the back. Underneath, a T-shirt. Her hair was restrained by a jogger's sweatband. Her health had improved, he thought; her complexion had lost the china pallor he associated with the beach house. His own reflection in the wall mirror behind the counter was unbearable: ravaged, old.

He approached the table.

Gleick looked up. "Christ, Morgan, what'd you do, follow me? You look like shit."

Beth gazed at him.

"Sit down," she said.

He pulled up a chair.

"I just got off work," she said. "Elsie, could I have a coffee here?" Elsie was the girl tying on her apron back of the cash register. A pimply brunette of uncertain age. She filled a cup for Beth. Black, Morgan observed; no sugar. He felt detached. "I guess you want your car back," she said. "I'm

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sorry, Morgan. I didn't know about the bus." She fished the keys out of her purse. "Here. The car's in an alley a couple of blocks down."

He accepted the keys. "That's not why I came."

"No?" She seemed unsurprised. "Tell me why, then."

"My God, isn't it obvious? I want you to come home."

"That's not my home, Morgan."

"It could be." His hands were shaking — only partly from the cold — and he hid them in his lap. "We had an ad hoc relationship. That can be changed. We can have a formal ceremony if you want. Whatever you want. I should have known. I shouldn't have taken advantage of you, when you were stranded, nowhere to go —"

"You didn't, Morgan." She laid her palms flat on the table, gently but firmly. "I took advantage of you. And that would not change if we were married."

"I don't believe that."

She drew back, frowning.

Gleick gazed at them both, aghast, party to a drama he could not, Morgan thought, conceivably understand.

He said, "Wouldn't it be better than being here?"

"No. I'm independent here. I earn a little money. And I've been talking to Emily. Maybe, with night school, I can get something better. A *good* job."

"Is that all you want? A job?"

She said seriously, "I don't know. It's a choice I never had. A choice I never thought I could have."

"Whatever you think you can buy — here — I can give you."

"I know. I *know*. And it wouldn't work." She looked into her cup. "This is partly my fault. You have to understand, Morgan, how utterly lost I was when you took me in. A strange and terrible thing had happened. You were my only contact with this world. And so I had to make myself welcome. I did that in the only way I knew how. Oh, it was obvious what you wanted. The delicate, demure girl. The china statuette. Castaway from a more refined era, when words like 'honor' and 'decency' meant something." She looked up. "Am I right?"

He thought again how perfect her face was, the fine bones, the pale skin, the graceful arch of her neck. Her eyes were calm and blue and deep. "Yes."

"Jesus," Gleick said softly. "You people are into some weird scene."

She said, "And maybe there's some truth in it, Morgan. Maybe this is a cruder age, on the whole, than the one I left. But at least the crudity is democratic." She said calmly, "I was a whore, Morgan."

"Jesus," Gleick said.

Morgan blinked. "Beth, I —"

"No. *Listen*. Is the word not explicit enough? I was a prostitute. A fairly elegant specimen of the breed, but that is the truth of it. 'Call girl,' I suppose you'd say now. A wealthy

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timberman paid my passage to America. He wanted to own me. Exclusively." She smiled. "More than one man has fallen in love with me."

He was suddenly dizzy. "I don't know why you're saying this, but —"

"Believe it, Morgan. It's the truth. And what I regret is that I lied to you by implication — because you seem a very decent man. I shouldn't have taken advantage. But I was very lost."

Rain lashed up against the plate-glass windows. "Cold," the counter girl said to herself, and dialed the thermostat. Morgan felt drained, empty. He looked at Gleick — the limp opacity of the man. It's true, he thought. By God, it's true. "That's what *he* wants," Morgan said. "That fake escort agency. He's a pimp, right? And he wants you to work for him."

"You have a crude mouth, Morgan," Gleick said. He stood up. "This is too weird even for me." And he turned back a step later. "Don't come down too hard on your girlfriend, Morgan. Maybe I did offer her a job. Maybe she wasn't interested."

He ordered a coffee and warmed his hands at it.

There might still be a way out of this, he thought. Even now. "Is that right? What he said?"

"That I turned down his offer?" She nodded. "It was very generous. But I couldn't accept."

A way out, he thought.

She shook her head. "Morgan, I know what you're thinking. Please, it was not a virtuous act on my part. I couldn't have worked for him even if I wanted to. That was the promise, you see. The promise I made the old Romany woman. If I survived, she said, I must abandon my occupation. Otherwise I would die . . . die as surely as all the other lost souls aboard that ship."

Morgan remembered. Prick her thumb and make a promise. Yes.

"Then come home with me." He was pleading now. He felt as if some connection had come loose inside him, that he had passed into some high, wild country in which anything was possible. It was true, everything she had said was true, but it didn't matter; it was her perfection he needed, the crystalline purity she wore about her like a cloak, and which was, he supposed, incorruptible. "I don't care what you might have done. I'll protect you. Anything you have here, I can give you —"

"You just don't understand!" Her eyes clouded. "You carry around that vision of yourself. The Good Man. The White Knight. It's like a cross!"

"Beth —"

"Morgan, I *want* to go home with you! Please, *please* understand! I want the attention! I want to be cherished, like the things in your shop! But —"

And she touched his wrist with her perfect white hand.

"But — don't you see? — I would

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It is always a pleasure to present a story by British writer Garry Kilworth ("Blind Windows," July 1982). "Hobblythick Lane" is a finely crafted tale of a future earth turned topsy-turvy, in which it's sometimes hard to tell "good" from "bad".

Hobblythick Lane

BY
GARRY KILWORTH

July. Frostfern patterns decorate the windowpanes. Mother says it used to be warm once, in July, when she was a little girl. I don't believe her. It's another tale, like the one about the man who used to come with presents in a sack. Just tales.

Yesterday I found a bottle of lemonade, buried in the rubbish at the bottom of the garden. I have drunk half already. I pour myself another glass, then plunge my face into the foam, so the bubbles go up my nose. It hurts, and tickles. I drink it down, too fast, and it pains the back of my throat; but I can't stop drinking, and although it hurts, I like it. I enjoy the pain driving away my thirst. My eyes water and it feels like crying.

"Anselm!"

Mother is calling Anselm awake. He sleeps in the shed because the third room leaks when it rains. The shed is a good thirty yards from the house, but she always tries, before having to go out and throw a brick at his door. She keeps a pile of stones ready, just outside, by the rainwater barrel.

"An*selm!*"

He won't wake up. He never does. The whole of Essex County can hear Mother's screech, but not Anselm. It's so cold in his shed that thick ice forms on the inside windows, out of his breath. So he makes a pile of blankets as high as a house and crawls underneath them like a dormouse. An earthquake wouldn't wake him. It would take the world exploding to penetrate those blankets and get at his ears.

I can hear Mother crashing the breakfast crockery in the kitchen and muttering to herself.

I rub the pane and spy out through

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the hole I have made. I can see the river, moving in the middle where the ice is not.The day is dirty yellow, as usual, and the river shines a little, especially the thin ice at the edges. Up from the river comes our lane, Hobblythick Lane, winding about and with houses spaced apart, on either side. This is all there is. The rest is all hard fields where the winter greens grow. It is summer, but they are called winter cabbage and such. I must ask about that, if I remember.

People in Hobblythick Lane say that Mother is a Christer. That's why we have to leave here, today. I'm nine years old and I've lived here my whole life. I don't want to leave, but I have to, because Mother is a Christer — everybody says, anyway. Since Dad died, people have been writing things on our wall and calling out. Mother is getting frightened, not for herself, she says, but for us, Anselm and me. When people start that thing, they don't know when to stop. (Like drinking cold lemonade, I suppose?) There's something inside, something you can't help, that makes you keep on going.

Years ago, before I was born, they had a smelling out. That's when you get someone who knows what to do, to go sniffing round the houses to see if there's any Christers or Christchuns about. Then they go on a Christer Hunt. They found some — not like Mother, she's no real Christer, or that would make me one and I don't feel any different to Porker, Maggot, or any of the other kids, even though they call me names now they never used to. No, these was positive Christers. They had a book called the Holy Bibler, which Witchley Smith found after they put stones on these people and pricked needles into them to make them tell. They prayed to someone called "God," who is invisible. "Creepy," Anselm said. "Really creepy." He's thirteen, so he should know.

"You couldn't see this God — nothin' like that. And these Christers, they bent down on their knees like this" — and he showed me how, as if he was playing marbles, except his hands was locked together — "then they said things called prayers, which *sound* like spells, but they're not. They're prayers . . ."

"What happened to 'em? These Christers?"

"That's for boys to know and little girls to guess," he said.

"I'm not so little anymore, and anyway, I know what happened, see. They sent them away."

"Huh. A lot you know, 'cause they burned 'em, see. They put 'em on a bonfire, like Guy Fawkes, an' set light to it. I saw it — or I would've done, if the bedroom window was facing the right way. Anyhow, I heard 'em screaming. Worser than a rabbit with a weasel at it . . ."

"That's a big lie," I cried, "they wouldn't." I felt the tears in my eyes.

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"A lot you know," he said.

But our mother's no Christer. She don't have no Holy Book and she don't do that praying. Well, only once, when Dad was dying. She made this kind of cross out of two sticks and put it over his bed. But she only did that when the spells didn't work. I know because I was there that time. Nancy Grissom came with Witchley Smith, and they tried all they could with spells and potions and herbs, but none of them worked. Anselm and me even caught a snake with a half-swallowed frog caught in its throat, which Witchley said was good, and he poured wax on the snake and lit it, but Dad kept on dying, even though the snake was writhing around and doing its best for him.

So after they'd gone, Mother made that cross out of twigs and said a few words. That don't make her a Christer. Anybody would do the same if their man was dying.

People say she said, "Bless." I don't remember her saying "Bless," and I was there, most of the time. She wouldn't say a word like that. My mother's never sworn in her life. Then the coven made us a visit and told her she'd done wrong and said she'd have to go through trial. That was last week.

"*Anselm*!"

I put on my other overcoat, on top of my sleeping one, and pull on my boots. Then I go outside, into the cold day, and bang on Anselm's door. I hear a muffled word and I know he's awake, so I walk back to the house. Down by the river I can see the pile of wood. They have been collecting it for several weeks now, and I even helped until I knew what it was for. Bits of wood, here and there. They are hard to find. When Dad was alive, we had a fire in our hearth at least once a month, but now there's only three of us to collect, it's once in almost never.

I go indoors. Mum has made some soup from greens, and I see her hunched over the cup. Her gloves have holes in them where the mice have gnawed, and her red skin, all chapped, pokes through. The soup is warm. She saved a rag to burn for this morning because we would need something warm before going out to wherever we are going.

"Eat some soup," she says, from under the layers of scarf.

"Anselm's comin'," I tell her.

Her eyes are all red and swollen. She has been crying again. She's still upset that they buried Dad in consecrated ground, but they said he died of poisoned water and was not fit to go with others. They said he was hallowed, or something like that. She tried to dig him up, but it was too hard, the ground, and we had to leave him holy. Mother had to make do with sacrificing a stoat over the grave and hoping that the blood would wash the earth clean of church and stuff.

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Anselm comes flopping into the kitchen, wearing his blankets with head-holes, over his coats. His nose is running and I look away.

"Lucifer," he says. "Hot soup!"

"Warm," says Mother, "and don't blaspheme."

"Well, I done it already," he says back, defiantly. Anselm is bigger than Mum now, and she has a hard time with him. We all eat breakfast in quiet, except for the wind that comes through the cracks. It's this norther wind, Dad used to say, what makes us so cold. I don't know. Me and Anselm, we don't mind so much, but Mum does. She hates it, and since Dad went, she says the nights are colder than death. I think death would be colder because you have to go into the ground like a block.

"We have a long walk to do," Mum says, "so eat up quickly. We should've left earlier — before dawn."

She has told us it's thirty miles we have to walk. She tells us again.

"How are we goin' to do that?" says Anselm. "Sis here will never make it. She's not done more than two in her life. You got to think of that."

"We got no choice," says Mum, softly.

"An' the marshes," he says, as if he hasn't heard her. "What about them? And crawlin' with Christchuns, too. They'll convert you, soon as look at you. It ain't right." He adds quickly, "I ain't afraid of 'em, but there's no sense in riskin' being converted, is there?" His face is a pale color, maggot gray, and I can see he is scared stiff, which makes me scared, too.

"I don't like Christers," I say.

Mother's lip trembles and her nose goes pinched-red the way it does before she cries. "You'll do as I say," she says; and Anselm stays quiet, but his face has gone the gray again. I can see his fist clenched by his plate. He's got a temper on him worse than a ferret, and I don't say anything in case he takes it out on me.

After breakfast, Mother leaves the things where they are, on the table, and packs the last few bits of food in a case. We all put on more things, and Anselm looks like a water barrel, but I don't laugh. Blodwin once laughed at Anselm and he split her lip — and she's a girl, too.

We, Mother and me, move out of the door, but Anselm, once he stands in it, stays put.

"I ain't goin', Mother. I'm stayin' here."

His voice is low, and I look up at Mother. She is crying again, and the cold wind freezes the tears when they reach her chin. Around us the yellow sky is quiet. None of the birds are around yet. I stamp my feet as the cold comes up from the ground.

Anselm stays put. He is crying, too, now, but his face is set. I know he means it. Mother knows, too, and she knows she can't make him.

"Anselm?"

"No. I ain't done no prayin'," he

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says. "I never done no wrong, see. It's you. You called upon Christ."

Mother goes white and she bites her lip. For a long while she just stares at Anselm as though he's going to change his mind, but he's not. Then she says, "Your father was dying."

"It don't matter, now," he replies his voice all soft and quiet. "You go. I can't come. I don't want to come. I'll dig him up, if I can sometime. I promise."

So Mother gives him a kiss, and he jerks his head away at the last minute and goes into the house. We see him looking through the window at us as we start down the hill. I can't see whether he's still crying or not, but I know he is because Mother's doing it and they always do the same things at the same time.

At the start of Hobblythick Lane, they're waiting for us, women and men. Kids, too. Blodwin is there, and Maggot. I smile at them, but they don't smile back. I wish I had some of the lemonade to give them, but the rest was ice, even though I kept it in bed all night.

Mother slows down to a stop as I drag the suitcase past her. I stop, too, and wait. The wind is cutting through my coats, and I want to walk, because it's warmer that way.

Witchley Smith is looking hard at Mother. He is a thin man with sucked-in cheeks and eyes like lamp wicks burning low. Glowing, smoky eyes, but not warm.

"You got to come," he says. "They expect it."

No one else says anything. They are all looking at Mother with a kind of eager look on their faces, as if someone had just seen the sun come out.

"Why don't you just light it?" Mother says.

"That ain't the way it's done, you know that. There's got to be a reason . . ."

Mother hunches in the wind. "Reason enough," she says.

"Not for this. It's the only way to hold 'em together. You're making it hard for me. . . . You should've left in the night."

"Well — I didn't."

"No, you didn't, and here we are."

He grabs Mother's sleeve and tries to pull her.

"You leave her alone," I yell, and kick Witchley Smith in his legs, over and over. He bats me with his hand, and Mother shouts, "No. Don't hurt her."

"Send her back to the house, then . . ."

Mother stares at me with funny eyes.

". . . We'll let them come down, afterward. They won't miss much of it. Just the first part. You could have gone, you know. You had the chance."

Someone brings out a kind of hoop thing, made out of hawthorn twigs, and goes to put it on Mother's head,

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but Witchley says, "No need for that."

Mother says, "Go back to the house. Stay in until someone comes. Tell Anselm you mustn't go out."

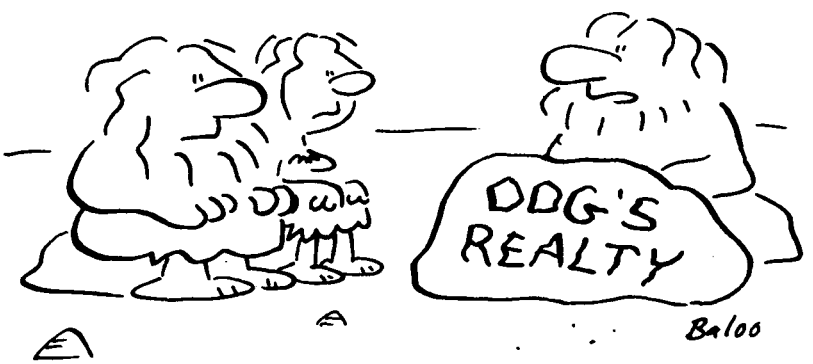
"I don't want to," I say.

"You must."

I look at her face, poking out from her scarves, and she looks better than I've seen her for a long time. Her face is all quiet and smooth. Then she looks around her, at the frosty ground. "Yes," she says. I see her glance quickly, at the churchyard on the hill, and then she gives me a little shove. I start back up toward the house.

Mother watches me, and I see her give a smile to me when I'm almost there. Then they go off, down the lane toward the river. She is not walking slow like she was before. She's walking fast, and the others have to hurry to keep up with her.

I go indoors to Anselm. He cuddles me. I guess he's feeling cold, and I cuddle him back.



"I'm afraid the only thing we have in your price range is a dinosaur's footprint."

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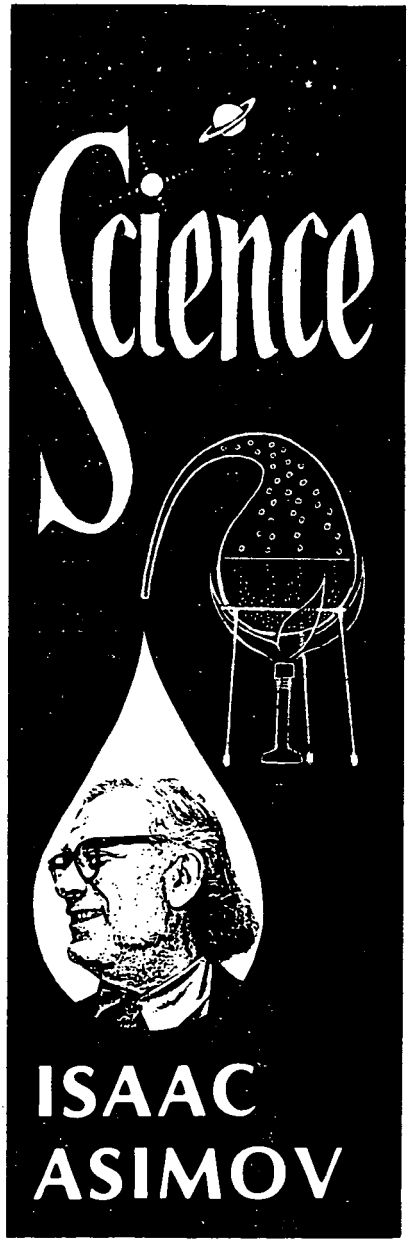

LABELS ON THE MOLECULES

A couple of weeks ago, I received a phone call from a young woman who inquired as to how she might obtain a copy of *In Memory Yet Green* (the first volume of my autobiography).

I suggested the library and she said that, indeed, she had a library copy, but the librarian was annoyed with her for continuing to renew it, and she was strongly tempted to steal it, except that this would go against her code of ethics — so what could I suggest?

There seemed no point in suggesting that she haunt the second-hand bookstores because no one but an idiot ever abandons one of my books after it has come into his possession, and there are few idiots who know enough to buy one of my books in the first place.

So I said, "Why do you want it permanently when you must have read the library copy?"

She explained, more or less as follows:

"I'm a psychologist," she said, "and I frequently have occasion to interview adolescent boys who are having difficulties with life. I want to do a biography of your early life for junior high school students, therefore, so that I can recommend the books to the youngsters who come to me."

"Goodness," I said. "You have just told me that these adolescent

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boys are having difficulties. Why should you want to make things worse for them by having them read about me?"

"It wouldn't make it worse for them," she said, "it would make things better. You see, these youngsters come to me with acne. They are not athletic. They are not aggressive. They are constantly being pushed around. They bite their nails. They're afraid of girls. They can't dance. They can't ride bicycles. They're nervous in company. All they really feel comfortable with is books and homework."

"Ah," I said. "They're good in school at least, aren't they?"

"Yes, indeed," she said, "but that works against them, for they're despised for it."

"They lack a good, wholesome all-American stupidity, do they?"

"If you want to put it that way, yes."

"Well, then, what do you do for them?"

"I tell them about you."

"About me?"

"Yes, I explain that you were exactly like them when you were young*, and now look at you — rich, famous, and successful. So if I can write a biography of you angled toward the adolescent male reader, it can help them a lot, renew their hope, give them something to shoot for. You see, Dr. Asimov, *you're a role model for nerds.*"

I was speechless for a perceptible period after that, but what could I do? Here were all these adolescent boys who were seriously handicapped by their lack of stupidity and their perverted hunger for learning. Was I to leave them in the lurch?

"Come over to my place," I said, "and I will give you a copy of the book."

So she did, and I did. I signed it, too.

But after these youngsters read my autobiography, they may very well make a beeline for my writings in order to satisfy their wild craving for knowledge at the very nerdish fount.

In that case, I had better continue to churn out those writings — so here's another essay.

This month I'm going to carry on from where I left off last month, when I was writing about hydrogen-2 (also known as "deuterium" or

**Not really, Gentle Reader. I* was *aggressive, and by no means nervous in company. Most of all, I was* never *afraid of girls.*

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"heavy hydrogen"). I'll do so, as is often the case, by way of a digression—

We know that things change in passing through our body, and those changes are referred to as "metabolism," which comes from Greek words meaning (more or less) "change in passing." The air we inhale is poor in carbon dioxide and rich in oxygen, but the air we exhale is considerably richer in the former and poorer in the latter. We ingest food and drink and we eject feces and urine, while some of the food after absorption turns into bone, muscle and other tissues while we are growing; and often into fat if we have stopped growing.

All we see with the unaided eye, however, is the starting material and the ending material, and that doesn't really tell us much if we can't see what happens in between. Seeing only the beginning and the ending gives rise to reflections like the following by the Danish writer, Isak Dinesen (who was a female, despite the revered first name she adopted for her pseudonym).

"What is man, when you come to think upon him, but a minutely set, ingenious machine for turning, with infinite artfulness, the red wine of Shiraz into urine?"

(This is from *Seven Gothic Tales,* published in 1934, and, if you're curious, Shiraz is an Iranian town, presumably famous for its wine in the days of the great medieval Persian poets.)

Of course, as organic chemistry developed through the 1800's, it became possible to analyze food and wastes; to realize that there were nitrogen-containing "amino acids" with molecules of a certain structure in food; and nitrogen-containing "urea" in urine, and nitrogen-containing "indole" and "skatole" in feces. All this tells us something about "nitrogen metabolism," but again mostly about the beginning and the ending. We still didn't know the vast territory in between.

In 1905 came a breakthrough, though, thanks to the work of an English biochemist, Arthur Harden (1865-1940). Along with his student, William John Young, he was studying the manner in which the enzymes in yeast (see A LITTLE LEAVEN, October 1985) broke down the simple sugar, glucose.

Glucose is converted into carbon dioxide and water, but the enzyme that brings this about doesn't work unless a bit of inorganic phosphate (an atomic grouping containing a phosphorus atom and three oxygen atoms) is present. Harden reasoned that the phosphorus atom was somehow involved in the breakdown, and by carefully analyzing the

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mixture in which the glucose was breaking down, he obtained a tiny quantity of something he could identify as a sugar molecule with two phosphate groups attached to it.

This molecule is sometimes called "Harden-Young ester" after the discoverers, but is more properly named "fructose diphosphate" and, obviously, in the breakdown of glucose, fructose diphosphate is an intermediate compound. It was the first "metabolic intermediate" to be isolated, and Harden, in this way, founded the study of "intermediary metabolism." For this and other work, Harden was awarded a share of the 1929 Nobel Prize in chemistry.

Following in Harden's footsteps, other biochemists located other metabolic intermediates and, over the course of the next generation managed to work out the course of metabolism of various important tissue constituents.

Such work was valuable, but it wasn't enough. The intermediates represented stationary mileposts, so to speak, along the road of metabolism. They were always present in small quantities since they were changed over to the next step almost as quickly as they were formed, and there was always the chance that some intermediates existed in concentrations too small to detect. Furthermore, there seemed no way to determine details of the change from one intermediate to the next.

It was rather like watching sizable flocks of birds from so great a distance that the individual birds could not be seen. You could tell how the flock as a whole moved and changed position, but you couldn't tell what shifting and turmoil might go on within the flock.

It would help if some birds had a color pattern different from most, so that you could watch for those splotches of errant color. Or you might capture some wild birds, and attach to one leg of each bird some little device that would send out radio signals, then release them. By observing the positions from which radio signals are received, you could study the inner workings of the flock.

In the study of metabolism, we are dealing with flocks of, let us say, glucose molecules. Vast flocks. Even a tenth of a milligram of glucose, a speck barely visible to the eye, consists of nearly a billion trillion molecules. All of those molecules, according to the chemical beliefs of the 1800's, would be exactly alike. There seemed no natural distinctions among them, and chemists were at a loss for methods of introducing artificial distinctions.

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German chemist Franz Knoop (1875-1946) thought of a way, though. In 1904, he was working with fatty acids, a number of kinds of which could be obtained from the fat stored in various tissues. Each fatty acid consisted of a long straight chain of carbon atoms, and at one end of the chain was an acidic "carboxyl group" consisting of a carbon atom, a hydrogen atom, and two oxygen atoms (COOH).

A peculiar thing about the fatty acids found in organisms is that the total number of carbon atoms in them (counting the carbon atoms in the carboxyl group) is invariably an even number. The number of carbon atoms in the commonest fatty acids is 16 or 18, but other even numbers can exist, both higher and lower.

It occurred to Knoop to attach a "benzene ring" to the fatty acid chain, placing it at the end opposite the carboxyl group. The benzene ring consists of six carbon atoms in a circle with one hydrogen atom attached to each. It is a very stable atom grouping and is not likely to be disturbed in the body. Knoop's idea was that the benzene-attached fatty acid would meet pretty much the same fate as the original fatty acid would have, and that the final product might still have the benzene ring attached so that it could be identified. In other words, the fatty acid would have a "label" which would persist and would identify the end product.

It was the very first use of a labelled compound intended to elucidate a biochemical problem.

Knoop discovered that if he added labelled fatty acids to the diet, he would eventually recover the benzene ring from the fat of the animal and that to the ring would be attached a two-carbon chain, the outer carbon being part of a carboxyl group. The name of the compound is "phenylacetic acid," and Knoop obtained this no matter how long the fatty acid carbon-chain that he had labelled.

Knoop then went on to the next step, which was to make use of a fatty acid with an *odd* number of carbon atoms in the chain. These were not found in living organisms, but they could be synthesized in the laboratory. They had properties that were just like those of fatty acids with even numbers of carbon atoms, and there was no obvious reason why they shouldn't occur in living tissue.

Knoop labeled the odd fatty acids with the benzene ring and fed them to animals. They didn't seem to be in any way harmed by the odd-number carbon chain, and when Knoop studied the fat, he found that the benzene ring had ended up attached to an atom group contain-

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ing just *one* carbon atom, and that carbon atom was part of a carboxyl group. The compound is called "benzoic acid," and Knoop found that benzoic acid appeared no matter how long the odd-number carbon chain had been to begin with.

Here is how Knoop interpreted his findings. He decided that each fatty acid was broken down by the removal of a two-carbon group at the carboxyl end. The cut end was then "healed" by conversion to a carboxyl group. Then another two-carbon group was clipped off, and so on. In this way, an 18-carbon fatty acid could be clipped to 16, then 14, and so on all the way to a 2-carbon group. The final 2-carbon group could not be dealt with because it was attached directly to the benzene ring, and the body lacked the ability to clip it off the ring.

It is fair to suppose that if a fatty acid is cut down two carbons at a time, it is built up by reversing that procedure. By beginning with a two-carbon fatty acid ("acetic acid"), which is known to exist in the body, and by adding on two carbons at a time, you would go from 2 to 4, then to 6, to 8, and so on. That would explain why only even-carbon fatty acid chains were formed in tissues.

(Of course, Knoop was still working with beginnings and ends. He had not definitely located anything between. That was left for Harden the following year.)

It was an excellent and successful experiment that made sense, but there were two catches. The benzene label wouldn't work on any other important compounds, and no other labels of this sort were found. Secondly, the benzene group was unnatural and might have distorted the normal metabolic procedures, giving results that were not really accurate. Something better was needed, something that would act as a label but would be completely natural and would in no conceivable way interfere with normal metabolism.

Then, in 1913, came the discovery of isotopes, as I mentioned last month. That meant that molecules differed among themselves in isotopic content. Consider the glucose molecule, which is made up of 6 carbon atoms, 12 hydrogen atoms, and 6 oxygen atoms. The carbon atoms can each be either carbon-12 or carbon-13; the hydrogen atoms either hydrogen-1 or hydrogen-2; and the oxygen atoms either oxygen-16, oxygen-17, or oxygen-18.

This means that there are no fewer than 25 trillion possible isotopic species of the glucose molecule, and all of them could, in theory, exist

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in a large enough sample of glucose.

The various species don't exist in equal numbers, however, because the isotopes themselves don't. In the case of hydrogen, 99.985 percent of the atoms are hydrogen-1; in carbon, 98.89 percent are carbon-12; in oxygen, 99.759 percent are oxygen-16.

This means that in the case of glucose, 92 percent of all its molecules are made up of the predominant isotopes only: carbon-12, hydrogen-1 and oxygen-16. Only in the remaining 8 percent does one find any of the comparatively rare more massive isotopes.

The rarest isotopic variety of glucose would be made up exclusively of carbon-13, hydrogen-2 and oxygen-17 (the last being the least common isotope of oxygen). This type of glucose molecule would occur, in nature, only once in every 10^{78} molecules. This means that if the entire Universe consisted of nothing but glucose, the chances would be only one in a thousand or so that even a single one of this exceedingly rare variety could be found.

Despite this vast variety of isotopic species, the situation was not improved. The isotopic species of glucose are mixed thoroughly and always in the same proportions. To be sure, different samples of glucose, would, on the basis of random variations, have the various isotopic species appear in concentrations that were a bit more or a bit less than the amount a true average would call for. These variations are so small, however, in comparison to the vast number of molecules present that they can be ignored.

But suppose you take advantage of the sluggishness of the more massive iostopes and allow carbon dioxide, for example, to diffuse through some permeable partition. Those molecules containing the more massive atoms of carbon-13 or oxygen-18, would lag behind. If you carried through the diffusion over and over, you would end up with samples of carbon dioxide that were rich in carbon-13 (and, to a lesser extent, oxygen-18). In the same way, the boiling or electrolysis of water would leave you with samples high in hydrogen-2, while the treatment of ammonia can give you samples high in the rare isotope nitrogen-15. (The common nitrogen isotope is nitrogen-14.)

Of these four elements, by far the most important to the chemistry of life, nitrogen-15 is 7.1 percent more massive than nitrogen-14; carbon-13 is 8.3 percent more massive than carbon-12; and oxygen-18 is 12.5 percent more massive than oxygen-15. Compare this with hydrogen-2, which is 100 percent more massive than hydrogen-1.

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It followed then, that after the discovery of hydrogen-2, this isotope soon became available for metabolic experimentation. It was the first isotope to be so available, but afterward, as separation techniques were refined, other comparatively rare isotopes became available, too.

In 1933, a German biochemist, Rudolf Schoenheimer (1898-1941), emigrated to the United States. (He was Jewish and saw no percentage in remaining in Germany after Adolf Hitler had come to power that year.) In the United States, he obtained a post at Columbia University and had a chance to work closely with Urey and, therefore, to obtain a supply of hydrogen-2.

It occurred to Schoenheimer that hydrogen-2 could be used to label organic compounds. Unsaturated fatty acids, made up of molecules containing less than the maximum amount of hydrogen atoms, have the capacity to add on two hydrogen atoms (or four, or six, depending on the degree of unsaturation) and become saturated. It would not matter to the unsaturated fatty acids whether they took on hydrogen-1 or hydrogen-2 and the end product could be rich in hydrogen-2.

Hydrogen-2 occurs in nature, and a particular saturated fatty acid molecule might, therefore, contain one or more of this isotope in the ordinary course of things. Since there is roughly one hydrogen-2 atom present for every 670 hydrogen-1 atoms, and there are 36 hydrogen atoms in the typical fatty acid molecule, there would be one fatty acid molecule out of every 360 that contained four, and one out of every 47,000,000 that contained six.

It is easy to flood a rat's food with "isotopically-labeled" fatty acids containing more hydrogen-2 than is contained in its entire fat supply. You then follow the label. After the rat has digested, absorbed and metabolized the fat, it can be killed and its fat can be separated into its different fatty acids. These can be oxidized to carbon dioxide and water, and the water can be analyzed by mass spectrograph to determine its hydrogen-2 content. Anything above a very small natural amount had to be derived from the labeled fat fed the rat.

Beginning in 1935, Schoenheimer, in collaboration with David Rittenberg (1906-), began a series of such tests on rats.

An animal eating food would absorb portions of that food into its body, would use some to build up its own tissues, and oxidize other portions in order to obtain energy with which to carry on its various

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functions. Any portion of the food left over could be stored away as fat. This fat could then be utilized as an energy reservoir during those times when the animal could not find enough to eat.

Why fat? Because fat represented the most compact form in which the animal body could store energy. A given quantity of fat, on oxidation, releases more than twice the energy that the same quantity of carbohydrates or proteins would.

It was assumed, as a matter of course, that these reserve stores of fat were relatively immobile, that the fat molecules were just waiting for emergency use. Since the animal might be fortunate enough to encounter food shortages only rarely, or even never, the fat stores might rarely or never be called on, and the molecules would then just lie there and slumber peacefully, so to speak.

But they don't. After Schoenheimer and Rittenberg had fed the rats the isotopically-labeled fats, they waited four days. Then analyzed the stored fat of the rat body. They found that half the hydrogen-2 atoms the rats had eaten were in that fat store. What this meant was that the rat (and, presumably, any other animal, too) was constantly using molecules from the fat store and replacing them with other molecules, or else that the molecules of the fat store were constantly exchanging hydrogen atoms with each other and with new molecules that were arising. In either case there was rapid and incessant activity.

Schoenheimer and Rittenberg tried other types of isotopic labels as well. They obtained a supply of nitrogen-15 from Urey and they used it to synthesize amino acids. Amino acids are the building blocks of protein molecules, and there is at least one nitrogen atom in every amino acid. An amino acid labeled with nitrogen-15 can be fed to rats and that label can be followed.

It turned out that the nitrogen atom did not remain in the particular amino acid fed the rats. After a remarkably short period of time, it was found in other amino acids.

This turned out to be a general rule. The constituent molecules of the body were not just sitting there waiting for some signal that a chemical change involving them was needed. Instead, they were constantly reacting.

These reactions need not imply any overall change, of course. A molecule could give up a pair of hydrogen atoms and pick them up again. It could give up the constituent atoms of a water molecule and pick them up again. It could give up a nitrogen-containing group and

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pick it up again. A molecule with a ring of atoms might break the ring and reform it, while a molecule with a straight chain of atoms might form a ring and then break it. Two molecules might exchange identical atoms or atom-groups, leaving each in the same state as before.

None of this could have been demonstrated without the use of isotopically-labeled compounds, but once such labels came into use and demonstrated this rapid, endless molecular change, one could see clearly (in hindsight) why this should be.

If molecules remain quiescent, unmoving, inert, and if they merely waited for some emergency, then when the emergency came there would have to be some drastic change in the molecular environment to convert quiescence into action. It would undoubtedly take time to "rouse" the molecules and get all the machinery into shape. The end result would be that it would be very unlikely that the organism could meet the emergency quickly enough.

If, on the other hand, molecules were always in action, quivering in place (so to speak), then, in case of emergency, only minor changes would have to be made. The molecules, rapidly undergoing a variety of changes in any case, would merely have to accelerate some and slow others. All the machinery would be already in place.

If there were organisms in Earth's early history that didn't make use of ever-active molecules (which, somehow, I doubt), they would have quickly been nosed out in the evolutionary race when other organisms that *did* have ever-active molecules developed.

Schoenheimer published a book entitled *The Dynamic State of Body Constituents* in which he described and interpreted all his findings, and it made a splash in the chemical and biochemical world. But then on September 11, 1941, when he was 43 years old, he committed suicide.

I don't know why he did this. To be sure, he had fled Hitler and, in September 1941, it seemed that Germany was winning. All of Europe was under its control. Great Britain had barely survived the air blitz, and the Soviet Union, newly invaded, seemed to be collapsing under the powerful German offensive. Japan was on the Nazi side and the United States was immobilized by the pressure of its own isolationists. I well remember the fear and depression of that time for anyone who had cause to dread the Nazi racial theories. Schoenheimer might have had personal reasons, too, but I can't help but feel that the state of the world contributed.

In any case, it was a tragedy in several ways. Consider that Schoen-

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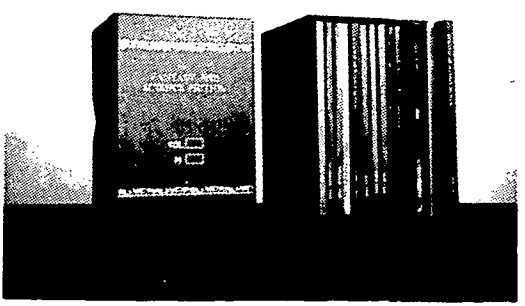
heimer had founded the technique of isotopic-labeling and had, in the process, revolutionized our view of metabolism. Consider, too, that further work (in which Schoenheimer would undoubtedly have participated had he lived) made use of such tracers and solved many metabolic problems in detail. It would certainly seem, then, that in a very few years, Schoenheimer would surely have received a Nobel Prize, had he been able to let himself go on living.

What's more, he didn't live to see the heyday of another form of isotopic label that came in after World War II was over. He himself, it if were possible for him to know that, might have bemoaned that loss even more than the loss of the Nobel Prize.

We'll take up that other form of labeling next month.



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O. Niemand has written four previous stories for F&SF, each set on the domed city of Springfield and each written using the tone and style of a deceased American short fiction writer (Lardner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and O. Henry). Here is a fine addition to the series; if Mark Twain had written SF, he may well have produced something very close to . . .

The Wisdom of Having Money

BY

O. NIEMAND

1.

The fastboat on the Springfield run hove itself out of true, integral space and into the smooth black sailing of incremental space. The pilot turned to the lazy bench and considered the two young men sitting there, who in their turn watched the pilot's every move with all the attention a caterpillar gives the first hungry robin of spring. The pilot's calm, stern expression did not change as he looked over first one cub — his own son — and then the other, his nephew, the son of his dead brother. The pilot cast a quick glance back at the screens — although there was barely a need to do so, as there hadn't been as much as a squawk from the graymen — and once more sized up the boys, with eyes squinted just a bit as if he'd struck an idea. By and by he called out smartly:

"Halan!"

His nephew hopped off the bench as if his behind had been singed. "Yes, sir, Mr. Yolney!" Down on the hurricane deck or in the main saloon it was "Uncle Grather," but in the pilothouse it was always "Mr. Yolney, sir!" The other cub had it no better; his own father was "Mr. Yolney" to him when the pilot's hands were on the pad and his eyes on the screen.

"Halan, come here, boy." Mr. Yolney watched the play of black space and white space on the forward screen; he didn't like what he saw; and he made the slightest correction with the pad that a human eye could discern. Poor Halan hadn't yet arrived

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at that exalted level of understanding that explained what in d——mnation his uncle had just done, or why he had seen fit to do it.

"Yes, sir." Halan wondered what bothersome business the pilot was going to plague him with now.

Mr. Yolney pointed to the starboard screen, where a great eddy of swirling white space was eating away at the calm and empty blackness. "Tell me, boy, what's this?" His long, pale-skinned finger aimed deep into the heart of the disturbance.

"Why, that'll be Ipimay 209." Halan hadn't been a 'prentice on the *Smoky Mary* for a full year without picking up a little useful information along the way. He even let himself stand with something like the cocksure posture he'd observed on all seasoned pilots.

"Right you are, my boy. Now, looky here at t'other and tell me what it is." The pilot's hand swung across to the portside screen, which should have shown no white space at all, and everything should have been peaceful, black, and a deal of easy running. Instead there was a small white blotch at the very edge of the screen, with rippling gray lines shoaling against it, like the tickling wavelets on the shore of some worldly ocean, as you may say.

Halan had to swallow, but his throat was too dry. He didn't have enough of a reply to wake a baby. "I don't know, Mr. Yolney." His posture went from confident to puzzled to scared; and he stared and stared at the screen; but the white blotch just did not want to disappear.

"Lively, boy, make speed! To lay away from that white space on the stabboard, we're going to have to cramp the boat full up to that other little piece of trouble you don't know nuthin' about. Take the pad, now."

It took a moment for Halan to find his voice; in the silence he heard his cousin, Thysix, laugh softly. Halan swore that he'd make Thysix pay for that laugh, even though Thysix was a year older, a head taller, upwards of twenty pounds heavier, and had laid over Halan in every one of the hundred fights they'd already had. Halan was crushed to hear the quavering in his raspy voice:

"Take the pad?"

Mr. Yolney did not deign to reply — he merely stood back from the screens and the pad. If Halan didn't take over the *Smoky Mary*, she would soon be at the mercy of 'cremental space. Even an iron-jawed old hand like Mr. Yolney didn't understand all the shifting, mysterious features of 'cremental — but Mr. Yolney would never admit that. It was policy aboard the *Mary* that Mr. Yolney knew as much about making way in the Fourth Derivative as the Unseen Powers that had put it there in the first place.

Halan rested his hands lightly on the pad. His fingers trembled and his palms felt sweaty. He looked anxiously

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at the forward screen and saw the lightening grayness of looming danger. His eyes moved from the starboard screen to the port screen — doom and destruction on the first, merely deadly disaster on the second. Halan couldn't see any advantage in either prayer or action, but by and by he said:

"I'm going to come off ten points to labboard." There wasn't conviction worth bothering about in the tone of his voice. He waited for an eruption of scorn and dismay from Mr. Yolney — there was only silence except for Thysix's continued giggling. Halan blinked his eyes and squeezed them tight shut; he took a deep breath; and he tapped the keys on the pad. Presently the great white subspace pattern of Ipimay 209 fell away somewhat; but the impossible thing on the port screen swung directly into the calibrated center circle. There shouldn't have been any danger at all here, yet there it was: a rock, a snag, a sunken wreck on the bottom of space. Halan asked helplessly:

"What do I do now, Mr. Yolney, sir?"

There was no reply except from the port graysman:

"One point oh, Mistah Halan!" The call meant that the fastboat would tear herself apart if she held on that course much longer. There was still time to save her, if the cub knew how.

Halan didn't even dare to take his eyes from the screen to see if his uncle was frowning or nodding in approval. How many nights had Halan fallen asleep to the glorious dream of booming along in a fastboat under his guidance through the white- and black-banded perils of 'cremental space? Now he was having his chance. He must show what he was made of in front of Mr. Yolney and Thysix. Halan himself had got to learn what he was made of now, too. It was a question that had vexed him for a long time, and to which he had never dared to make an answer. He would know that answer very soon.

Halan hoped that the whirling white thing on the port screen might be an electronic failure, or a phantom trick of the engine-room strikers, who liked to hide away in their holes belowdecks and think up mean dodgery to play on the uppity ones in the pilothouse. Halan hoped it might be anything at all but a true dire peril — that was too many for him. Behind him even Thysix had fallen silent. Halan lifted a fingertip.

"What are you fixing to do?" came Mr. Yolney's deep voice.

"Call for everything and lean her hard to labbord."

"She'll never make it." The pilot moved in closer but did not take back control of the fastboat. "Looky here. You have to gauge the strength of these treacherous gray bands. You'd never get her clear of that rock — the bright white tells you that, the depth

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of those gray shadows. Fetch her back to stabboard — easy, easy now." On the port screen the brightness fell away a bit. The gray ripples that marked the calamity and ruin around Ipimay 209 crept back on the starboard screen.

Said the port graysman:

"Oh point nine."

Said the starboard graysman:

"Oh point one."

No one else said a word. Halan stood up on the heading, although it was ever so obvious to him that he, Mr. Yolney, and everybody else on board the *Smoky Mary* were headed straight for a sudden and fiery end. The starboard graysman called out:

"Point three."

The deadly rings that reflected Ipimay 209's position in true space commenced to blaze in the screen's scaled markings. If the graysman's call reached point five now, so near the danger, there would be no further reason to read the changes — the crew would be again at peace. They would all be dead and therefore, by many accounts, at peace.

"Point four."

Halan nearly swooned on the bridge; but his fingers rested lightly on the pad; and he waited orders from Mr. Yolney. Halan hoped the orders would come tolerably soon, because the fastboat was beginning to settle pretty low in the unforgiving grayness. Said Mr. Yolney at last:

"When I give the word, heel her round to labboard with all she's got. Hold her steady."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Halan. He felt fear clutch at his heart; minutes ago — or were they only seconds? — he had wanted to perform the same maneuver and skirt the smaller white blotch to leeward; but now it was too late for that. Now Mr. Yolney was ordering him to throttle up the fastboat and ride straight into perdition. The forefinger and middle finger of his right hand touched the two buttons that would fetch up every ounce of thrust the old tramp had to spare. His left middle finger lay on the key that would alter course. Mr. Yolney never looked down to see that his fingers were on the right keys — but Halan knew now for certain how far he had to travel before he was good enough even to carry Mr. Yolney's cap. He glanced down and was satisfied that when the call came, he wouldn't hit the wrong buttons and send them all to Jericho.

Suddenly Mr. Yolney cried:

"*Now,* boy, stand on her! *Stand on her,* blast you, you tin-plated excuse for a pryanian!" With one prodigious wallop the pilot knocked Halan away from the pad and against a bulkhead, nearly staving in the boy's skull as a bonus. When Halan's senses returned, he saw Mr. Yolney calmly skinning the port screen's threat to windward as close as white on snow. A minute passed, and another; and then all three screens showed nothing

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but deep, safe blackness.

Halan had tried to go around the danger, but his timidity would have cost them all their lives; Mr. Yolney had the nerve and the sureness to pass between the two white spots of death, near enough to the smaller of them to spit in its eye as they passed. Halan knew that it would take some earthquaking heroics to refurbish his pride and self-respect. The question at the moment was if Mr. Yolney would ever again trust Halan at the pad.

The answer to that, until they came out of 'cremental space, was No. Halan fooled away his watches on the lazy bench. Mostly Mr. Yolney held the pad; sometimes it was his partner, Mr. Sackness; and sometimes it was that conceited flathead, Thysix, who always made sure that Halan noticed how fearlessly he tapped the keys. Halan noticed only that Thysix never faced a choice betwixt the devil and the bright white night. Perhaps if some unexpected white speck reared up on one of the screens and the graysmen started their frantic singing, *then* everyone would learn with what sort of ticking young Thysix was padded out. However, no such hazard evidenced itself the rest of the journey; and day by day Halan grew more restless on the bench. He was only moderately thrilled when by and by Mr. Yolney laid the fastboat in her marks and brought the *Smoky Mary* out of the solid blackness into true space.

2.

Springfield was an asteroid in the middle of nowhere that could have been a perfect jewel of a moon if there had been a planet hard by for it to revolve around. It was large enough to have gravity comfortable to some of its visitors, but too weak or too strong for others. It was near enough to an unremarkable star to give it a bright face and a permanently dark side; and that's almost all that could be said about its features. There was a city on the rock — a domed city also called Springfield. Inside the dome there were artificial days and nights; air to breathe; expensive water to drink; expensive food to eat; expensive places to sleep; and the skillful scavengers, swindlers, and other industrialists who were found wherever human civilization put down its irksome roots.

Aboard the *Smoky Mary*, Mr. Yolney switched the screens from "derivative mode" to "true space mode"— although no pilot ever said "true space." At the pad, the proper words were "integral" or "zero-exponential space." The screens became telescopic scanners. Halan and his cousin pressed behind the pilot to see the distant, unblinking star snap back into view; and they watched the unpromising lump of lifeless matter that was Springfield gradually grow larger on the forward screen. From a distance

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of fifty thousand miles, Springfield looked like a dead rock painted dull black across half of its worthless real estate. The green-domed city was not visible at all.

By and by Mr. Yolney gaped and stretched; his watch was coming to an end; and he knew it as all pilots know it, without the need of consulting a clock. When he was relieved by Sackess, he said:

"Fifty thousand and closing handsomely."

Mr. Sackess nodded but did not reply. He moved toward the pad. Mr. Yolney said, almost as an afterthought:

"I'd ruther Mr. Halan made landfall." The casual remark had an audacious effect on everyone in the pilothouse. Cried Mr. Sackess:

"But he hain't never had the experience!"

Mr. Yolney merely raised a hand to wave away his partner's objection. After all, Mr. Sackess was the junior pilot aboard the *Mary*; and as such his opinion counted little more than that of one of the deckhand rousters. "This is how he will get the experience."

Halan stammered:

"But — but — Uncle Grather —" The notion of taking the *Smoky Mary*'s yawl down on his own hook scared him out of his wits. He had a dreadful clear vision of bringing the boat aground a mite too handily and smashing it into worthless, twisted rubbage — incidentally murdering all the paying passengers and himself into the bargain.

Mr. Yolney departed the pilothouse as if no one had spoken; and he was not seen again during the remainder of Mr. Sackess's watch. Halan glanced at Thysix, who looked wonderfully eaten up with envy. Halan would have been overjoyed to pass along the honor to the other boy, but Mr. Yolney's word was law.

Mr. Sackess said:

"I will shape her into her parking orbit. When we are cleared by the port authorities, Mr. Halan, you will take command of the yawl. Is that clear?"

"Aye, aye, sir, Mr. Sackess."

"Until then, please stow your scabrous carcass in your quarters. I will send for you in due time."

"Aye, sir."

With that exchange the junior pilot restored his temporary sovereignty at the pad. Both cubs were relieved of duty, and they retired to their tiny cabin in the forecastle. They missed nothing exciting as the *Mary* hove toward the asteroid. It was a tiresome bit of time because there was nothing for the pilot, the graysmen, or anyone else to do until the Springfield harbormaster challenged them. Halan had something to eat; he caught a few hours of sleep; and he was roused by the second mate in the middle of a vague but troublesome nightmare.

Directly, Halan brought himself to the cockpit of the fastboat's yawl

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and seated himself at the console. There was a control pad much like the one in the *Smoky Mary's* pilothouse; but there were no screens — taking a boat down from orbit was done mostly by computers. If they failed *and* their backups failed, screens or windows would serve no purpose at all: watching the ground rushing up at a fatal velocity is no more helpful than it is diverting.

Halan glanced at the second mate, who had the responsibility for putting the yawl through its preflight checkout. "Everything snug?"

"All green, Mr. Halan, taut and shipshape."

Halan punched a row of diagnostic keys and saw all their lights flash green. Then he called the Springfield harbormaster and asked permission to come ahead.

A computer's synthetic voice answered from the asteroid's surface:

"You will be set down on landing area 117. Please switch control of your craft to remote guidance."

Halan pressed the appropriate button. His function as pilot was now ended, unless a catastrophe happened and he must override the automatic systems — but Halan did not wish to think about such a thing.

There was no sensation of motion as the yawl left the *Smoky Mary*'s docking bay and approached the asteroid. There was only the steady regaining of the weight — at least some of it — that Halan had sloughed when the yawl left the fastboat's artificial gravity. There was a soft bump when the boat grounded; and then the electronic voice spoke again over the radio:

"Stand to and prepare to receive boarders." These would be Springfield's customs clerks, who would check over the *Mary*'s manifests and passenger list. Halan tapped off all the keys on his pad, letting the second mate remain behind to watch over the life-support systems. All in all, Halan felt a good deal of success; he hadn't killed a single passenger — he hadn't so much as maimed a limb.

A flexible tube led from the yawl's air lock down into a large receiving area, so Halan got no quick look at Springfield when he left the boat. The passengers hurried through the tunnel and the low-ceilinged, echoing chamber, but Halan ambled along curiously. He had listened to stories of Springfield all his life — wild tales, bawdy tales, fearsome tales — and he meant to savor every detail. When he returned home again famously, he would add his own stretchers to the stale lot he had heard so often. He showed his 'prentice pilot's papers to a bored and sleepy woman in a gray uniform. She said:

"Pilot's wardroom is through there." She pointed to a large door made of glossy black wood brought from some far-off world, and bright as glory with polished brass fittings.

"Now this is something *like*," Halan

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thought. He took a moment to adjust his cap so that it listed a trifle to starboard, just as Mr. Yolney wore his. Then he nervously grasped the gleaming doorknob, pushed open the heavy door, and went through.

To his surprise, no one stopped him or questioned his right to be here in the fraternal clubroom of the pilots' association. Halan felt a crazy elation. He was *one of them!* He was a *pilot* — of sorts. Back home on Bouligny, many dreamed of leaving that placid world and flashing hither and yon through the universe, but few ever played that trump. Yet here Halan was: not merely off-world, not just on Springfield itself, but here as a kid-gloved *pilot*, who merely by the grace of his profession's grandeur alone would probably someday be offered a reserved loge seat among the Heavenly Elect.

Halan was awed by the others in the common room, all laughing and cursing and trading lies. He suspected that he did not truthfully belong among the quality; he felt suddenly like an intruder — a tiny one at that — like an ant using among mammoths. He took off his cap, put it back on, took it off a second time and ran his hand through his short brown hair, and fitted the cap on the very crown of his head. The swaggering set of it was gone along with his confidence. Halan felt conspicuous and meager; he sought a chair where no one might see him, where no one might offer a greeting or ask a question. He found a place in a dim corner, on the far side of the room from the bar where the pilots mostly congregated.

"What are you drinking?" came Mr. Yolney's voice.

Halan jerked around, startled. He said:

"Uncle Grather! Nothing — I mean— I'm not drinking — I mean"

Mr. Yolney smiled in a friendly way; the voyage was behind them now. It was time to collect their pay — and spend it. Beside him stood his son, Thysix, whose cap was still tossed at an arrogant angle. The pilot asked again:

"What are you drinking?"

"Nothing, sir."

"You don't drink?"

"No, sir."

Thysix said with a wicked grin:

"He dasn't, Pa. Aunt Leofra would whup him ragged."

Mr. Yolney looked amused. "You've *never* had a drink?"

"No, sir."

"Ah, well-a-well, I promised your mother that I'd make a man of you or slaughter you, whichever seemed easiest. You're learning the piloting trade as fast as ever a numskull sap-head like you can, so I suppose I must do the whole thing from hell to breakfast. You'll drink what I'm drinking —bingara."

Halan started to object, thinking of his ma's prohibitions against such vices; but she and her world were a

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tolerable long way off; and if he was to become a man, Halan must chart those vices and steer by them without her. He couldn't grow to maturity behind his ma's skirts. "I thank you kindly," he said.

Mr. Yolney turned to Thysix. "Bingara for you, too, boy?"

Thysix's grin wavered just a little before he answered:

"Well, sure, Pa."

The pilot led the two cubs to the bar and ordered the drinks. Then he announced to the assembled company:

"I give you my son, Thysix, and my nephew, Halan: the two most promising cubs to come out of 'cremental space since my own initiation." All the other pilots laughed appreciatively. Mr. Yolney threw his drink down at one go.

Halan looked at Thysix, who looked back at Halan; both boys emulated Mr. Yolney and threw their drinks back with something of his dash and flair; but their reactions need not be described at length. It need only be reported that the pilots' merriment increased to an uproarious level.

One of the other men questioned Mr. Yolney about the *Smoky Mary*'s run. Said Mr. Yolney:

"I'll say it was peaceable enough. That is, it was until I began making real speed. I slipped down from Second Derivative to Third and then to Fourth, and we were just a-boomin' along until we come to the reaches around Ipimay 209."

Another pilot, a short man with the wan complexion of a wax dummy, the mark of these men on whom no sun ever shines, remarked:

"Ipimay 209? I'm bound through that stretch."

Mr Yolney laid a finger alongside his nose. "Then you'd be wise to lay in a deal of caution. I had that star hard on my stabboard beam where I wanted it, when I spied a white flare off to labboard that hadn't ever been there before. There warn't barely room enough betwixt 'em to whisper a kind word."

"Bosh. There ain't nuthin' around Ipimay 209 — not a planet, not an asteroid, nuthin'. Never has been."

"A comet?" another man offered.

Mr. Yolney shrugged. "I don't give a rat in a rain barrel *what* she was; she was setting there making me choose which of two quick deaths I'd ruther."

The short pilot demanded:

"What did you do?" Everyone at the bar was now hanging on Mr. Yolney's every word.

He ordered another drink first to fire up their interest some, tossed the bingara down, then looked around at all the other faces and smiled. He said:

"I turned the pad over to my cub." He pointed a finger at Halan; then he grasped the two boys by their arms; and he hurried them out of the club-

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room while the pilots exploded in consternation behind them. Someone called after them:

"If that ain't all the brass-bound nerve!"

Once outside, Mr. Yolney let loose a loud guffaw of his own, very pleased with himself. "They'll be yelpin' over that one for another year!" Halan didn't know what to feel, remembering keenly how the incident had actually happened; he was aware that Thysix was seething now with something more than envy. He was giving Halan a look that threatened a reckoning not far in the future.

Mr. Yolney laughed again and said:

"Time's running thinner by the minute, boys. Here we've been on Springfield the best part of an hour and we ain't yet been tattooed nor let our pay ride on the backs of a pair o' crooked dice."

"We hain't got our pay yet, Pa."

"That's where we're heading directly, son, and *then* I'll show you rapscallions the splendidest time a body ever seen who managed to stagger out alive afterwards. It takes more'n walking away alive from your first landing on Springfield to turn out a man from a boy, and that's what your mothers don't understand."

Thysix's face flushed with excitement. "We even goin' to try metasense, Pa?"

"That's right, boy — we'll amp our brains till they're all over glowing."

"What else, Pa?"

Mr. Yolney laughed at his son's impatience. "We'll get ourself anchored in Sot's Bay and fool away half our money in a cutthroat game of old sledge and then bust our knuckles in a drunken brawl; but first I got to make *men* of you, though I can do that in less'n half an hour."

Thysix look dumbfounded at the very notion, but said:

"Less'n half an hour, Pa? How you fixing to do that?"

Mr. Yolney cocked his cap a tad more to starboard and said:

"We're going to sign on wives, boys."

Wives! The very evil horror of the notion hit Thysix hard, so that his grin of anticipation wandered rudderless until the boy looked like he could no way keep from jumping ship. Old Thysix was wonderful anxious to try his hand at buzzing his skull with electricity and bar liquor; at gambling; and at tawdry port-town women taken aboard according to ancient tradition and maritime statute — that is, you pay the wharfage fee and lay alongside, you unship your cargo, and you hoist sail afterward to make way for another vessel. A *wife*, howsomever, well, that was just too various for Thysix. Young Halan, to his silent discomfiture, found himself in shocked agreement.

3.

The office of the Perseid Queen

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Line was in a building a few blocks from the terminal, and Halan nearly died three or four times as he stared at the gaudy and uncommon sights that passed him by in the short space of five minutes. Why, he saw men and women and creatures and things so powerful fine or so powerful ugly that he knew he couldn't put them in his tales for the folks at home — all his old friends would think that Halan had sold them for sure, taken their willing credence and left them with nothing but booming nonsense.

Mr. Yolney didn't bother to rap on the door to the Perseid Queen Line's office — he just threw it back as if he owned the whole corporation from carpet tacks to starboard thrusters. And blamed if they didn't just treat him as if he did, too! He swaggered up to the desk where a lovely young lady was sitting, and he commenced to talk about one outrageous thing and another until she most bust from laughing. Then all of a sudden he laid off his carrying on; and he put on his solemn face; and he asked the young lady:

"Has the cap'n been in yet to collect his pay? Have I missed dear old Captain Cazareen?" Captain Cazareen was the coffee-and-cake captain of the *Smoky Mary*, and there never was much love lost betwixt him and Mr. Yolney on account of Cap'n Cazareen got to wear the uniforms with the braids and brass buttons, and get piped aboard so's everybody could watch, and had the terrible job of walking up and down the decks reassuring the ladies and making certain they wouldn't faint when they were sure they heard the creakings of black holes and astrophages and whatnot in 'cremental space where there wasn't nothing to hear in the first place, except in the pilothouse where it wasn't fit for no lady to listen anyways.

"The captain was here not more than a quarter of an hour ago, sir."

Mr. Yolney smiled at his son and his nephew and said:

"Last on the boat and first off every time, he is, and first to nail down his hard-earned pay! Why, if I had to promenade in those fine suits and listen to the miseries of those rich widows and talk over the hard life with every tiresome old rip who wisht he'd 'a' gone into space ruther than sell ribbons or rakes or whatever he done, I'd be low and gritless myself when the boat sets down. It's the pitifulest life, bein' a space captain, boys — and never you forget it, nuther." He looked around to make sure that everybody in hailing distance was catching the full length and breadth of his bullyragging. A good pilot like Mr. Yolney earned eight or ten times as much money on every trip as the ship's captain, despite the captain's gold-leaf uniform and parlor manners.

The young lady nodded at Mr. Yolney's taking on and said:

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"The captain did leave these for the boys." She gave two sheets of paper to the pilot.

Mr. Yolney read one aloud:

"'This is to testify that I, Thodoleus Cazareen, contracted captain of the Perseid Queen Line's vessel *Smoky Mary*, do hereby attest that the ship's apprentice pilot, Thysix Yolney, performed his duties admirably and with full consideration for the safety and comfort of the passengers and his fellow crew members. I therefore recommend that he be inaugurated as a full pilot with all the privileges pertaining thereto.'"

"Well, I'll be hanged!" cried Thysix.

Said Mr. Yolney as he tore the document in half and crumpled the pieces:

"It may well come to that, son. You'll be a pilot when *I* say you're a pilot, and not a split nano-never before." Thysix went from a-whooping and a-hollering to as low as ever a living body could be. Then Mr. Yolney took the other piece of paper, which Halan reckoned was his own advancement; and the pilot performed the very same act of destruction to it; and blamed if Halan didn't feel just as tromped to mush as Thysix. Said Mr. Yolney:

"Cap'n Cazareen's word don't stand no show and it ain't worth spit to no other pilot, nor to no other shipping line looking to *hire* a pilot." And *wasn't* he calm as the torn and twisted pieces of paper fell to the carpeted floor. Thysix looked at Halan again, and both cubs tried to size how long it might be before Mr. Yolney would soften down and give them *his* official endorsement, and if they might strike it so lucky as to live that blessed long.

Mr. Yolney observed his charges' low demeanor and said:

"It's blooming high time to find you wives — your mournful faces are just about awful to see. I learned a long time ago that if it's one thing that can make you forget a rattlin' bad trouble, it's *another* trouble worse'n the first. And they ain't yet run up against nuthin' more plaguey than a wife."

"Then why do we want to get one, Uncle Grather?"

Said he:

"Because every once in a while — when the devil's mucking about elsewheres — a wife can suddenly be the most uncommonly splendid thing going. Take them all round, wives are inspiration and tonic, if you pay no mind to their blattering and bawling and whatnot."

"But why must we *marry* them, Pa? Why don't we just take up with some fine young women the way creation intended, the way civilized folks do? Wives is illegal and immoral and just generally looked down on back home on Bouligny and every other respectable place I know of."

The pilot smiled and said:

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"*That's* why you must try it now. Marriage is allowed on Springfield, son; married people from jerkwater worlds pass through here every day; and don't nobody give 'em so much as a squinty-eyed look, nuther. Everybody gets to hankering after the things they can't have, it's only human nature. If you went home and settled down with some tolerable woman, you'd always wonder what it would be like to *marry* her. It would get at your mind and d— — near drive you mad, most. Now is your chance to find out all about it and why it's a perversion of everything that's good and proper, and a flat-out embarrassment amongst decent folk."

Thysix's grin returned as he considered the imminent, illicit, and undefined delights of marriage; but Halan was still of a mixed mind. "I still don't see how marrying a woman is different than building and sharing a home with one in the regular way."

Mr. Yolney nodded his head solemnly, as befitted the wellspring of wisdom and the voice of experience. "You'll see. It just ain't what you can explain to a body in words. You have to study it out for yourself."

The wife shop was on Long Street, at the worn-downedest end of that grand boulevard near to the barrier of the green dome itself. The shop didn't look respectable from the outside — but then it wasn't pretending to be a church or a union hall. It was slid in betwixt two luridly disreputable establishments that offered any and all vices unobtainable in the more specialized wife shop shouldered up against them.

The pilot led the way into the shop bold as brass; and his son followed only a pinch less confident; but Halan was in a dismal quandary, though he kept his objection unspoken. This, he reckoned, was also part of his pilot's training; but for his very soul he couldn't fetch up on a likely reason why it should be so.

4.

Now, Mr. Yolney didn't fancy the gorgeous outfits or high hats or diamond stickpins that many fastboat pilots encumbered themselves with when they went into the town. His suit was cut just like his plain pilothouse uniform, only all of a soft, cream-colored calfskin; it had silver buttons, and pale blue trim the hue of his home world's sky at sunrise; his cap was like his pilothouse cap, but cream-colored, too, with his pilot's insignia in gold. He wore shirts of modest cut and color — but of the finest silk and other fabrics, so that a body might know that Mr. Yolney *could* 'a' trotted around a diamond stickpin — huge precious rings, and boots that cost a month's wages. A covey of pilots found in a Springfield taproom was usually plumed in every color of the rainbow and two or three be-

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sides, each man trying to outdress and outsplendor and lay over all the others; but even in such an assemblage Mr. Yolney was remarkable, because he got considerable show from his quiet elegance, and he knew it.

The pilot stopped just inside the door of the wife shop and waited for the proprietor to come to him. At first the shopkeeper noticed only Thysix and Halan, and he let his gaze glance off them and toward what other worthless motes of dust had drifted into his store. By and by he spied Mr. Yolney in his fine suit, and the merchant's expression changed. He moored in place that canny grin you see on starving wolves, and on folks who want to tell you how interesting their lives have been, and on other such predatory creatures.

Meantime, Thysix and Halan out and looked about the shop, wonderfully thunderstruck by the merchandise on display. There were many glass-walled boxes; in every one stood a perfect vision of a wife, each more beautiful than the last; and the very meanest of them was prettier and more precious than anything the boys had ever seen. The wives in their unadorned cases did not move or blink or breathe; they were unclothed but for a small orange plastic necklace that fitted tightly around their perfect throats; they gave no sign that they might be alive or, at the worst, but recently deceased; yet they were so lovely that if they were real or holographic models or only clever plaster counterfeits, it made no sort of difference to Thysix and Halan. The boys stared first at a tall, gentle-faced sample with a fine lavender cast to her skin; then they went all to smash over one the color of a rain cloud, with hair as shimmery as mother-of-pearl, and eyes of copper and steel-blue flecks; and then they commenced to run from one case to another, calling out in astonishment or delight or disbelief.

Just when they had got jamfull of beauty and the particular feelings that it may arouse, the pilot and Mr. Cosgred, the shopkeeper, flanked them to starboard. The two men were beaming as if they'd been bully friends ever so long, and as if Mr. Yolney had charted the *Smoky Mary* to Springfield just to renew this old acquaintance. Mr. Yolney observed Thysix's excitement and said:

"You set your mind yet, son?"

"One of *these*, Pa? I must pick one of *these*?"

"Ain't they fine enough for you, boy?" The two older men whooped, though it was plenty knotty enough for Thysix and Halan to see what they were laughing about.

"Blazes, Pa! Every one of 'em's in bloom and likely as t'other! I just reckoned — I judged — maybe they was *too* fine and ruther fancy for me. I mean, for a *first* wife, you know."

Mr. Yolney put on a serious face and considered a moment, then said:

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"These are the rarest, beatenest wives on Springfield, boys; I wouldn't let you fall up against nuthin' but the best — I owe that much to your mothers, and I owe it to your departed pa, Halan. But thunderation! D'ye want to traipse around escorting a wife with a horse-face and a stagger and a bray like a swozzled stricker's boy? Every consarned gaff-line mate or mud-clerk which passed by on the street would have a wife to make yourn look like the pitifulest thing out; and then every time I struck another pilot, why, he'd laugh his bones loose about it; and then all my years of work and dedication wouldn't be worth bothering about — the association would prob'ly exterminate my license to save their pride. And every man jack of 'em'd be taking on about it from here to Nevermind! *No!* I *won't* have it! Take which one you'd ruther and let's us get the marrying done; and remember who has command around here, and who still must step lively."

Halan figured that this Uncle Grather was only trying to act the pilot and a deal of an outrage, too; and that little, if any, of that speech — splendid as it had been — was anything but lies or at least powerful stretchers. But then Mr. Yolney said:

"Mr. Cosgred, I believe I will marry Miss Lyjia." The shopkeeper looked as satisfied as a cat at a fish fling, and turned to the two boys.

Thysix fetched up when he saw this wasn't but a show or a casual rumble, but the very preliminaries to a set of three sure-enough flagrant matrimonies. He said:

"Well, Pa, as this is my first wife, I s'pose nuthin' will do but that she must be the best, but I hope to gracious if I kin make such a choice."

Mr. Yolney nodded solemnly and turned to Mr. Cosgred. "The *best*, sir."

"That would be Miss Melcie."

Thysix's face went all over pale. "Miss Melcie," he whispered. He glowered at Halan as if it was the younger boy's fault that all this was happening. Said the merchant:

"And the other young man?"

"Well, if Miss Melcie is the best, dadfetch it, I'll just have whichever comes right next after her." He glared back at Thysix, determined that he would get out of this gloomy mess with his pride untarnished further; and his body still alive, if possible.

The shopkeeper plated on his blank, serious, well-meaning look again. Halan tried to remember where he'd seen another display like that; and by and by it struck him that it was on the face of everybody standing around the grave of his pa, when the box had been set in the ground and people were tossing in their little clods of dirt and flowers and sad poems and whatnot. It made Halan all of a tremble to think of that. Mr. Cosgred said:

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"There is Miss Varenia, who is quite perfect in her own way. Please step over here." He led the way to Miss Varenia's case.

"Miss Varenia," said Halan, trying her name on his tongue for size. "She's never been a wife before? I mean — I was only thinkin' that — well, after all, she's next best to Miss Melcie — and she might prove out too audacious for me, being only a cub, you know — and, heck — " Halan might have gone on in that skittish way until the artificial day lit up the streets at dawn, except the salesman patted the air in his soothering way. Still, Mr. Cosgred was insulted, and he ripped out and said:

"*None* of them has *ever* been a wife before. If all you're wanting is a night of middlin' fun with a woman, they have got annies all over town for that, and they ain't so difficult to locate, nuther. I reckoned you boys for some sort of refinement, and when the honorable pilot wisely chose Miss Lyjia, I knowed I warn't goin' to have to put up with no such foolishness as I get all the livelong day; gawpers all boggled, and smirkers and suchlike saps who come in here just to peek at these yer wives, and then they swift clip out to tell their right down friends what they seen."

Mr. Yolney eased the air a bit by declaring:

"I've been married a time or two in the past, as you well know, my friend, but my young hands are making their first passage through the straits of wedlock, as you may say; so I'm sure you'll forgive their disgustful iggorance."

The proprietor dropped his insulted air so fast, there wasn't no more hurt to him than there is to a snowball. He glanced from Mr. Yolney and Miss Lyjia to Thysix and Miss Melcie, then to Halan. He said:

"Let us connect your bride and proceed with the formalities, the civil whim-whams obliged upon us by our public servants." It was just like the moment of uncomfortableness had never happened at all. And blame it! That Mr. Cosgred had *style*, according to Halan's way of thinking; though it was a different sort of style than Uncle Grather's; and just maybe a tad less grand, in its own admirable way.

The shopkeeper twirled a round color lock on the side of Miss Varenia's case, and lifted aside the glass lid. Within the box, Miss Varenia looked mighty sleepful, like Snow White or Lenin, like there wasn't anything in nature that could rouse her; and that maybe she plain *couldn't* be waked, and that she was as demised as ever a body was; and that got Halan all quivery. But nothing come of it, because as soon as Mr. Cosgred carefully stripped off the orange plastic necklace, Miss Varenia was all connected again in a flash and filled with life and stepping softly and sweetly from her casket, blushing and carrying on mighty shy and pretty, though just

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like Miss Lyjia and Miss Melcie, it didn't seem to make no mind to her that she didn't have no more clothes on than a handful of red beans. The store owner took advantage of the moment when everybody was just too struck stupid to say anything; and he gave a little regular speech about the official business of getting married and what it meant and what the city of Springfield expected and the different kinds of marriage he had to offer and all that sort of bother. Mr. Yolney, he knew all this foolishness from before, but Thysix and Halan were both looking at Miss Melcie and Miss Varenia and didn't hear a blessed word of it, so the pilot reckoned he'd have to take the boys in hand and steer them through the treacherous course of legal and nuptial matters.

The merchant looked at Mr. Yolney and said:

"I assume you'll be taking your usual one-year lease?"

"That's right."

Thysix frowned. "*Lease*, Pa? Why, I reckoned to sign on Miss Melcie permanent, unless you judge she's nigh unboatable and should ought to be spied out from cam cleats to keelson."

Mr. Yolney said:

"I'm sure she's as going and spry a wife as you could find, Thysix; and I'm just as sure you run no risk giving your custom to my old friend, Mr. Cosgred. He's leased me a wife or two in our time, hain't that the truth?" The store owner just smiled modestly. Mr. Yolney continued: "I was just advising you, Thysix, that it's a sight less irksome to lease, and there are a heap of other advantages, too. For one thing, you don't have to worry none about repairs and maintenance, which I can promise you I learned about to my sorrow before you was even a nagging notion in my jubilant mind. If something unlucky served Miss Melcie — and fate preserve her from anything of the sort — Mr. Cosgrove would gladly give you the loan of another wife just about as likely as yourn. And then, when the year's come to an end, why, you just bring Miss Melcie back to Mr. Cosgred's emporium, and you lease yourself whichever new soft-voiced, dadblamingest wife that takes your fancy."

Thysix listened, but it was plain that he suspicioned it was nothing but traps and hiving. "The truth is, Pa, that at the end of the year you don't own but *nuthin'*; and after payin' all that money, and trainin' a wife so's she acts civilized and just so; and feedin' and clothin' and paradin' her around, then you wants to pay a whole *nuther* deal of money on a *second* wife you don't know from Joshua's niece's cousin, and start the whole pison-long business *again*. And you don't never strike a day when you actually own a rattlin' *thing*!" He looked as if his father was trying to smouch some awful, childish foolishness past him for some reason.

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"When I was your age, Thysix, I thought the same things; and I made the same mistake you're sure enough about to make. But, as I says, I judge this is all part of your growing up. I could mention that a leased wife don't depreciate like a boughten wife does, nor must you pay certain taxes and levies that otherwise remain the responsibility of Mr. Cosgred. But this is where I stand back and let you take the pad and control of your own private future, as they call it." He folded his arms and turned to Miss Lyjia, and the two of them commenced an acquaintance that showed every bit and grain of cordiality, and bid fair to grow into deeper understandings yet to be.

Said Thysix:

"Then I'll *buy*, ruther than throw my money away and have nuthin' but expired contract papers to show for it. Halan?"

Mr. Yolney turned to look at his son and said:

"Leave him alone for that. He can cipher his own mind." And Halan spoke up himself:

"Oh, well, I s'pose Uncle Grather knows more than Thysix and me lumped together about this wife business, but I judge buyin' is pretty good enough, too." He just couldn't let Thysix leap out to some imaginary promotion. The boys glanced at Mr. Yolney, wondering if his advanced years and the dreadful responsibilities in the pilothouse made him look for easeful answers during his occasional time ashore in such places as Springfield.

"Fine," said Mr. Cosgred. "I'll have the papers ready in a few moments."

Thysix gave Halan a nudge and pointed toward his winsome Miss Melcie. "This ain't bully nor nuthin'! I reckon not! This must be the biggest boss dodge of all!"

Halan, for his part, however, wanted to shin it out of the wife shop before anything even more troublesome happened; and he wished that he hadn't let the pilot begin this tour of Springfield and all its ruinations. Halan, he was just ready to slip out, when the proprietor came back with three sets of contracts. Mr. Yolney signed his lease, and Miss Lyjia daintily set down her name; and then Mr. Cosgred gave the two boys their papers. Thysix and Miss Melcie signed theirs as quick as a sneeze through a mitten; but Halan hung back, pretending to read this clause and that emendation and one other proviso and a rider. Thysix laughed and said:

"You look scared most to death, Halan!"

"Lord A'mighty, no!" Halan signed his name, and so did Miss Varenia. Thysix arranged them all, with Mr. Yolney and Miss Lyjia betwixt the younger couples, Thysix himself and and Miss Melcie on one side, and t'other couple on t'other. Thysix asked:

"Is there much ceremony? I get

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uncommon fidgety in ceremonies."

The salesman examined the contracts and collected his fees. He said: "No ceremony. As soon as I give you your receipts and enter this data in Springfield's data base for vital records, you will be wedded couples. I hope to do business with you all again." They had their receipts in a tolerable short time, and then Mr. Yolney led them back out onto the dreary street. Thysix leaped right in with:

"Gamblin' now, Pa. Metasense next?"

The pilot stared at his son for a moment. "It's your *weddin'* night, boy. That ought to hold you until breakfast, at least. A good pilot needs lightning judgment and quick reactions, but above all else he needs stamina during the long and perilous watches. You must test that tonight. Sometimes there's just no way I can understand you, Thysix; it's like you packed a deal of Bouligny's rich black mud behind your eyes for when you got lonesome. Now we must find rooms."

Mr. Yolney's pay, many times more than what the cubs earned, left him with enough spending cash to hire a lovely suite in a good hotel, even after the cost of his wife's lease had been deducted. The boys, however, were not in such handsome condition. They had little of their wages left, and had to take rooms in a low part of town, some distance from the pilot's splendid hotel. As they parted, Mr. Yolney said:

"Remember men — for men you have become — your education has only barely *begun*. All that flummery aboard the *Smoky Mary* was just work, common labor. Now you must find out what *life* is all about, and life will lay out flummery every time. It's up to you to see that you turn out worthy of your folks, and the others home on Bouligny. I plan to put in here in Springfield maybe six months or more, but I s'pose you don't have *that* kind of fortune put by. Don't ever forget that you can come to me for advice anytime; but not a loan nor asylum from the law." He led his Miss Lyjia up to the hotel, leaving his charges staring after and watching the gaudily uniformed porters and other fancy hands hopping to their duties; and then Mr. Yolney disappeared inside. Halan felt his heart slump down towards his stomach somewheres — he hadn't sized on learning all about *life*, at least not for a considerable number of years yet to come. Now he had the burden of a legal wife — a notion that was just beginning to skaddle its horribleness around in his brain. He said good night to Thysix and Miss Melcie; and then Halan went with Miss Varenia to their meager suite — to their new home.

Though it may be true that he had all the grit of a colicky puppy, howsomever Halan was fit for it, life for him had begun.

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5.

The prettiest surprise to Halan was he *liked* being married. Varenia was tall and slender and beautiful, as many of the wives in Mr. Cosgred's shop had been; she had fine hair of a medium length and a delicate claret color; her eyes were long and heavy-lidded and as bright as polished brass; her voice was low and loaded to the gunwales with humor most times, with honest interest or sympathy or what else might be needed t'other occasions. She was helpful and loyal and such, just as Halan had expected when he laid his money down; but it was more than that — she wanted a home, not just a place to live; she was determined to see that they were happy, not just satisfied; and Halan was always striking delighted discoveries of little, thoughtful things she had done for him. He found himself spying out ways to let her know how much she meant to him, too. It wasn't long before he told her that he loved her. He was still a mite shy about speaking aloud of such things, but he said:

"I've been fond of you, Varenia, but it's doggone well past that point now. I feel as if I'd found you on Bouligny myself and courted you and we'd agreed to a five-year temporary contract, ruther'n getting . . . getting — "

"Married?" Varenia smiled at him.

"Well, yes. What was such a splendid woman as you doing in a wife shop anyways?"

She studied that out for a moment and said:

"I always wanted to go into one of the helping professions. I thought about being a nurse when I was younger."

"I mean, what if you'd been picked by some pitiful, lowdown rip you couldn't hardly abide?"

"I'm protected by the contract you signed. If a husband does anything contrary to the contract, a wife can easily get a divorce; and the penalty to the husband is severe enough to catch his attention. And dear old Mr. Cosgred has the interests of the wives near his heart, as well as the interests of his customers. If he hadn't 'a' judged you'd be responsible and kind, he wouldn't 'a' taken your money."

"I'm glad to hear that. And I'm glad he *did* take my money, sweetheart." Halan embraced his wife and kissed her.

Varenia pushed him away after a little while and smiled. She said:

"Your cousin isn't so happy now, though, is he?"

Halan was astonished. He said:

"Why, how you talk! How could he *not* be happy, with such a wife as Miss Melcie to do for him?"

"Melcie's as good and sweet as a body could wish, but that may not be enough for Thysix. Melcie visited me yesterday, and I do believe she was

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nigh onto tears, Halan. I was hoping you'd visit them and see how it all lays, and if he's treating her all right, and everything."

"Naturally, Varenia, if you reckon I should. I'll go on by there tonight."

"Melcie was my best friend, till I met you. It would put me at ease to know she's comfortable and glad with Thysix."

After supper Halan walked through the eternal springtime of the domed city to the building where Thysix and Miss Melcie had taken up residence. His feelings were all bothersome for no reason that he could figure. Thysix's apartment was not in the least way grand, nor was it mean and shabby; put beside Halan's own, no near-sighted man could tell the two apart. Yet regardless there was a different air within Thysix's place — a mood of unsettlement and imperfect peace. Halan wished mightily that he had not agreed to come, or that he had brought Varenia with him; with those two wishes ungranted, he hoped only that he could foot it out of there as quick as may be.

Both Thysix and Miss Melcie were polite as pie to him and invited him to have something to eat, which he declined, saying that Varenia had whupped up a special dinner for him that night; then Miss Melcie engaged Halan in a pleasant talk about how he and Varenia were getting along and how they were settling into married life. The chat was amusing enough, but by and by Halan saw that Thysix had allowed Halan and Miss Melcie to share the sofa, while he sat sullen-faced in an old and faded armchair nearby; and the only decorations Thysix put on the conversation was an occasional essay at a joke — but that the joke was always more than half-ways bitter and always drew a look from Miss Melcie as if she was fit to bust out crying. She tried to cover up, but Halan could see her wince and shrink back whenever Thysix let fly with one of his peevish dismal remarks. Presently Halan could stand it no longer, and he said:

"Thysix, I come here tonight for to speak with you private about something that's troubled me for a month, most. Why don't you and me light out for a beer and talk it over? That is, if Miss Melcie won't mind her dear husband going off to some den of thieves with me for a spell."

"Miss Melcie won't mind. I reckoned you'd fetch after my advice sooner or later, Halan."

The two boys stood, and Thysix led his younger cousin to the front door. Halan looked back over his shoulder, making a sort of unspoken apology. Miss Melcie gave him back a weak smile. Before they left, Thysix looked at his wife and said:

"Give me a little money, won't you?"

Miss Melcie went to a desk in one corner of the room, pulled down a drawer and took out a box, and se-

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lected a few bills. She carried them to Thysix, who took them without a word. After Miss Melcie closed the door behind them, Thysix explained:

"I give over all the accounts to her. She's good at sums, and I'd ruther not have the bother. I can size up if she's skinning me any, and I judge I'll know how to bring her thinking around if she fancies she can come any such game with *me*."

They left the building. It was still evening; it was still springtime. They headed towards a saloon nearby. Said Halan:

"I'm sure Miss Melcie ain't the kind to skin you none, Thysix. She's every bit and grain as devoted as my own dear Varenia."

Thysix stopped on the sidewalk and said:

"Melcie tops Varenia every which way, Halan, and don't you never forget that, nuther. I asked for the *best*, and I sure have got myself the best."

"I hope to gracious, Thysix, I 'member it all exactly. So she's as uncommon honest as she is uncommon pretty." Thysix only grumbled and shoved his way into the crowded barroom.

They drank a beer in silence. Thysix didn't have anything to talk about, and Halan was trying to lay out a course towards what he wanted to ask. They had another beer, and then Thysix spoke up of a sudden:

"Bein' married ain't so much," says he.

"I'm finding it tolerable enough so far."

Then Thysix, he swallowed some more beer and shrugged and said:

"And that's just the very wust of it! 'Tolerable!' Just as tolerable as rotting away here in Springfield, when I could be in some pilothouse, a-working for my license. I can't see no advantage in waiting for Pa."

Halan commenced to see what Thysix's problem was — he was getting the fidgety fantods about fooling away another five months or so, till Mr. Yolney signed on with another fastboat. Halan asked:

"Are you fixing to sign on without your pa? With another pilot?"

Thysix frowned into his beer and replied:

"God A'mighty, that's a perfect awful election to make, but I've considered and considered, and I hain't come up with one other idear."

"And you could stand leaving Miss Melcie behind for a spell, too."

"Aw, she's plenty sweet enough, Halan, just as you say. It's mainly that bein' married ain't so much, that's all; it ain't what I thought it would be."

"Talk to your pa, Thysix, an' tell him what you told me. He'll give you the proper heading — he was a cub hisself, once. Tell him how you're just itchin' to get back into space. You have got to trust your pa."

"Ain't *you* itchin' to get back into space?"

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"Not so's a body'd notice, Thysix. I'm wonderful happy with Varenia; when Uncle Grather is ready to ship out, I'll ship out with him. I'm in no hurry."

Thysix shook his head and muttered:

"I been lookin' and I been lookin', and I hain't seen nary a trace of it yet. And this is *Springfield*, blame it!"

"What you been lookin' *for*, Thysix?"

Then the older boy's face turned all dismal and sad, and he said:

"I'll be blast if I know!" Right then all the anger and resentment Halan had ever felt towards Thysix went out of him, and he was freighted up with another feeling, something he couldn't put a name to. It would be awhile before Halan judged it was pity.

The next day, Thysix talked it all over with Mr. Yolney; and the upshot was that perhaps Mr. Yolney wouldn't stay on Springfield six months as he had said, and that perhaps Thysix could hold out a sight longer and keep himself from busting with ambition. Thysix allowed as he would give it a try, and everything went back to normal for a bit.

By and by, official letters arrived at the homes of Thysix and Halan, and they caused no end of grief. They were bills from the Springfield Public Service Commission, for the first month's matrimony tax. Halan took one gander at the bill and 'most swooned — the city wanted a full quarter of all the money Halan had left after the wedding and paying the month's rent on the apartment. He showed the bill to Varenia and asked:

"They a-going to send a bill like this every month?"

"Shucks, yes, of course. Getting married is an unnecessary luxury, like getting your body tattooed all over. It ain't like eating and sleeping and breathing — people won't die if they don't get married, though sometimes they judge that they must. Most folks take out temporary contracts for one bit of time or another. It lets out all the risks; you never know what sort of traps and jimcracks a body will bring with him into a marriage. In some places, I've been told, marriage is actually illegal. It's been outlawed on the far, frontier planets; Mr. Cosgred could never explain to us just why those people need a law to protect them, ruther'n just plain common sense. Mr. Cosgred's mail-order business would be more'n he could keep up with, otherwise."

"Never you mind all that! I can't afford to pay this much every month, luxury or no luxury."

Varenia commenced to let tears fall. "Then you *don't*. . ."

Halan said quickly:

"Oh, *don't* say that I don't love you! Hang me if I don't love you, dear — it's just this bill! We don't have much money."

"I know that, Halan."

"I'll have to see Uncle Grather.

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He'll have to sort this out for me." He felt all empty inside.

"Per'aps this is one reason why he didn't just rip out and buy Miss Lyjia. He leased, you know, and so *be* doesn't get a reckoning every month. Your uncle is an experienced man that has studied what to do with his money. I judge he's middling wise about most things, besides just piloting a fastboat through white space. Go see him and ask his help."

Halan looked glum. Said he:

"Uncle Grather knowed this would happen to Thysix and me. He *told* us to lease a wife as he did, ruther'n buy; but Thysix wouldn't have none of that, and I up and followed like a dadfetched saphead. I s'pose my uncle will give me hark from the grave when I tell him about this, but there's nothing else for it." Halan kissed Varenia good-bye, and he walked through a bleak Springfield to Mr. Yolney's gilt-edged foofaraw of a hotel.

The pilot listened to Halan's story without asking questions or showing an opinion until the boy had finished, ten full minutes by the watch. Directly, then, Mr. Yolney *did* give him down the banks for Halan's flat-headedness, at great length and volume and with the fine look to detail a body might expect from a fastboat pilot. He said:

"Looky here, I reckon you want me to overhaul your breached hull for you, boy; but just think on what I once said to you — I'll furnish all the counsel you need, but no loans. You won't amount to much of a man if I fetch out my money and make all your trouble disappear. Why, d——m-nation! there'd be one more numskull triumph after another for you if I did! You must study making your own bed, Halan, and then you must study lying in it, and then shaping it up again in the morning."

"Aye, aye, sir, Uncle Grather; I know I reckon I gone up on my own. I'm not asking you to give me money. I have got to do whatever must be done on my own hook, sir, but I need you to tell me where and how to commence upon it."

Of a sudden, Mr. Yolney settled some and stopped his bullyragging. He said:

"That is truly a fine thing to hear, Halan. Your spineless cousin — my own son, if it comes to admitting that scurvy fact — was here just a tad afore you; and his only scheme was to hive me out of the money with one lame alibi or t'other. I sent him back with his lines all a-fouled, you may have a good deal of certainty about *that*; and *wasn't* he flinging a blizzard fit! No, I'm glad I took the wrong notion, as far as you are concerned. If you mean to get the money — from a body besides myself — then you have got to earn it. You must find a job of some sort here in Springfield, to help you and your powerful lovely bride live restful till we lift off again in a

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few months. It will be tolerable easy for me to find you such a position, though it won't be grand employment; but I judge you don't give a sow's sidesaddle for wearing gaudy uniforms to work, or suchlike foolishness."

"No, sir. Any decent work would answer for us."

Mr. Yolney clapped the boy on the back and said:

"It heartens me to hear it, Halan — and it will hearten your mother, too. Avast worrying, boy. Anyways, it's my bounden duty to help you this-a-way. I'll give you the news soon. Present my better wishes to your Miss Varenia — you see, I save all my *best* wishes for my own Lyjia. Just remember this precious sentiment, which my own dear ma learned me many years ago: It *is* true that two folks in love may live as cheaply as one — it's only unfortunate that it costs five or six times as much."

And so with good hopes, Halan bent his course homeward along the way that had magically been made shorter and more pleasant in every respect.

6.

One day followed the other into history, and Halan judged that he had never been so contented. When he married Varenia, he had reckoned on recreation and titillation and delectation and perhaps even satiation. He had never figured on exhilaration; he had never figured on happiness. The only source of worry was the money the marriage was costing. Mr. Yolney discovered that there were a considerable number of fine positions available for Halan — in six months. It was unlawful on Springfield to hire a body who was not a resident. In six months, Halan would have this choice of attractive jobs; of course, in six months he would likely be in space again with Mr. Yolney; in six months, unless Halan struck some other plan, he would be in debtor's prison, Varenia would be disconnected or returned to Mr. Cosgred, and the trouble would be settled with no profit in it for nobody. Halan was reminded of the urgency of the problem one day when he received another bill from the Springfield Public Service Commission:

> We sent you an itemized statement of your account and still have not received payment for this amount due. We ask for your prompt payment. If this is not done, will take stronger action that could not only affect your continued service, but your rating with an intersystem credit-reporting agency as well. If payment has recently been sent, thank you. Otherwise, send it without delay.

Halan read the notice and felt himself shiver. He said:

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"They are threatening to interrupt service. What do they mean?"

Varenia gave him a wistful smile and said:

"Do you remember when you first saw me? I was wearing an orange plastic necklace then, because I was disconnected. The Public Service Commission can disconnect me again anytime, if we're late in our payments."

"I'll be blest! I'd ruther die than let something like that happen to you, dear."

"It's not so bad, Halan. It's like falling asleep and not dreaming. I had a headache when I was reconnected, but that was the worst of it."

"No, dear, the worst of it is not having the money to stop them from doing such a terrible thing. Per'aps Thysix was right; per'aps I should sign on with another pilot as soon as I can. I'll see Thysix today and find out what success he's had."

The climate was more cheerful in Thysix's apartment. The older boy declared that he had found a pilot who would take him on for a cub. Said he:

"My worries will be over, Halan. Mr. Safroth is a friendly man and, by all accounts, a good pilot. He offered to pay me more than even my pa paid me."

Halan watched his cousin scrouch about the parlor all satisfied with himself. Presently Halan said:

"Your pa's feelings will be hurt, Thysix."

Thysix frowned. He let himself drop down into his favorite armchair. "Hang it, I know that; but I lay Pa will understand. He knows how much it means to me to get my license. Ain't *you* in a hurry, too?"

"Cert'nly I am, but I'll wait for Uncle Grather."

"Suit yourself, Halan."

"Though I can't get any other work and Varenia and I may starve to death before your pa is ready to ship out."

Thysix made an indulgent gesture and said:

"I'll take care of you, my boy. I can take an advance on my wages and loan you enough to see you through."

Halan's eyes opened wide. "You'd do that for me?"

"Shucks, why not? We're flesh and blood, after all." Halan suspicioned that it made Thysix feel good to get him obliged, to make Halan seem even more pitiful. Said Halan:

"Thank you kindly, Thysix."

"Come back tomorrow and I'll have your money for you."

Halan said good-bye to Thysix and Miss Melcie and took his leave. He walked homeward slowly, wondering if he was more glad to have his problem fixed, or more unhappy to be under Thysix's thumb. As he fetched up on his building, he judged that he was glad. It meant that he didn't have to worry about Varenia being disconnected; that was worth all the dreadful gratitude he'd have to show Thysix from now on.

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The gladness gave the day mainly a hopeful glow; however, it vanished quickly when Varenia showed Halan another message from the Public Service Commission.

> Urgent!
>
> Our records show your account to be past due. If we do not receive your payment *in our office immediately,* you will force us to disconnect your service. If disconnected, we cannot assure you that service will be restored until the *next working day following receipt of full payment* of the amount due plus a reconnect charge and a cash deposit, if required. Remember, *you* are our most important resource.

"Blame it!" murmured Halan. He folded the notice and put it in his pocket. He was scared most to death. He hoped Thysix remembered his offer. He gave Varenia a quick kiss, and once more hurried to his cousin's house. Halan was surprised to see his uncle there; Mr. Yolney was soothing Miss Melcie, who sat on the sofa, a-weeping into a lavender-scented handkerchief. Halan took a quick look around and asked:

"What's happened?"

The pilot said:

"It's Thysix. He's been disconnected." Mr. Yolney gave his nephew an amused look. The pilot wasn't in no sweat at all.

"Thysix? But that's terrible!."

"Oh, he won't suffer worse'n a little banging in his head. Maybe he'll learn suthin' from this."

Halan had trouble ciphering the business. He said:

"I reckoned it was Miss Melcie they must disconnect."

Mr. Yolney grinned. "'Twas Miss Melcie paying the bills. The accounts were in her name, so they disconnected my sapheaded son."

"What are we going to do?"

"Oh, I'll take care of his debt, I reckon. I can't leave him like this. Maybe I threw a little too much growing up at him all at once. He just ain't as rattlin' clever as I was at his age, or else per'aps he is. I'll sign on with the next fastboard what needs a pilot, and you boys can draw advances on your pay to leave with your wives. You'll get your licenses after one more trip, I judge; and then you boys can take up your lives howsomever you want. The first thing, though, is getting Thysix's brain to working again. Maybe when the Public Service Commission jump-starts him again, he'll wake up with more sense and less cockiness in him."

Halan looked at Thysix's monstrous still body, then at Miss Melcie, and finally at his uncle. Said Halan:

"Uncle Grather, sir, I think I'd ruther stay here on Springfield with Varenia. As soon as I can, I'll find myself some sort of job. I purely love going into space and traveling about the worlds, but I love Varenia more.

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I've only just found her, and I don't think I can leave her behind so easily."

Mr. Yolney gave his nephew a shrewd look. "Are you sure of that, boy?"

"Yes, sir, and I hope you can forgive me. I don't mean to seem ungrateful."

"By no manner of means! I'm pleased for you; and I know your ma will be, too, even though you went and got married. She'll take the notion a sight better in time. Looky here: any thick-skulled baboon can learn to be a pilot; all it takes is some common sense and good judgment and a fine knowledge of when to bluster and when to 'vast blustering. Finding happiness is a deal more difficult; but if you've struck it already, why, you'd be a fool to throw it away. Stay here on Springfield, Halan. I have some help for you, too — a little money, a last gift from your pa. He told me to give it to you when I judged you wouldn't just fool it away on fribbles and wuthless trifles. It ain't much, but it'll keep you till you can pay your own way."

When Halan went home and told Varenia what had happened, she was surprised as a calf staring at a new gate. "You'd really stay here with me instead of going back into space?" she asked.

"We're *always* in space, dear. We're in space on the bridge of a fastboat or here under the dome in Springfield, or even in the fields on Bouligny. Space is always around us. That's the real beauty and the real mystery of the universe. Now, Thysix can't seem to *see* that; that's why he's so all-fired eager to ship out as soon as may be. To me, though, the romance of being a pilot got lost somewheres, hidden per'aps by the bothers and trials of learning the art. I've found more wonder here with you — the wonder of falling in love. Thysix can't fathom that, nuther. If he'd 'a' knowed the life of a cub on a fastboat warn't so much for romance, I reckon he'd never 'a' left Bouligny. He's looking ever so hard for something, and I'm tolerable certain he won't never find it."

"I feel sorry for him, then."

"So do I, Varenia. The thing is that you must shed the pretty kickshaws of life so you can live the real article; and Thysix; he can't seem to turn loose of his ideas of adventure and romance. He always dreamed of a gorgeous life and glory, so he's bound to be disappointed — by both piloting and the ups and downs of love."

"But piloting *is* grand, after all, isn't it? And I know that love is, too. Thysix is looking for some kind of imitation grandness instead."

"He's not much older'n I am. Per'aps he'll figure the difference soon."

Varenia looked sad and said:

"I just hope he doesn't lose Melcie before then. Oh, Halan, we got another message while you were gone." She gave it to him and he read it:

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Said Halan:

"Well, we can pay it now."

"I guess our problems are over, thanks to your pa's wisdom."

Halan smiled. "I don't s'pose our problems will never be over — that's part of what makes real life harder and more lovely than gaudy dreams. But we'll take up the problems as they happen, and we'll work together to solve them, and that will stand us considerable show. We have the whole future together; a body can do a mess of fine living in a lifetime, if he allows hisself the privilege."

"Are you sorry you married me, Halan? Instead of just leasing?"

"My uncle had suthin' like a good idea, I reckon; at least he doesn't have to worry about the bill every month. Still and all, I'd marry you again if I must and gladly pay the tax. But remember, dear: when we visit my ma on Bouligny, we must pretend we *aren't* married. Those folks are dismal old-fashioned, and my ma would never live down the scandal!"

(from page 114)

be in mortal danger."

He found the car and began to drive north, but the storm was on top of him suddenly and he knew the route to the beach house would be hopelessly dark and dangerous. He found a phone booth in a motel lot near the ocean and huddled inside for a time, watching as the black waves crashed like fists against the breakwater; and then he was dialing Emily's number with numbed fingers, dazed, and the words that circled like high white birds in his mind were *harbor, shelter, home.*

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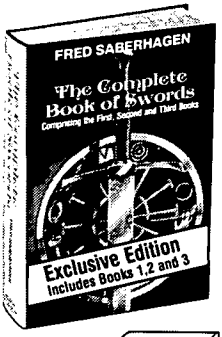
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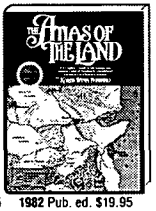

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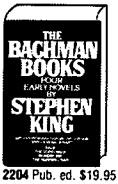

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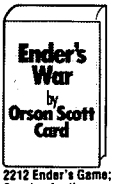

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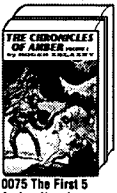

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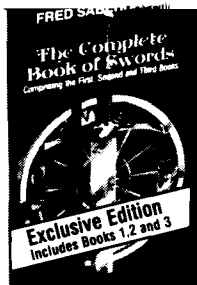
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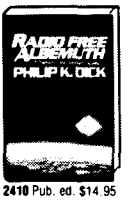

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